



my dear ana

Table Of Contents

Recovery quotes

Everything You Need to know

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 8

Epilogue

Resources

Authors Notes

Everything You Need To Know

Eating disorders are serious mental health disorders. They involve severe problems with your thoughts about food and your eating behaviors. You may eat much less or much more than you need.

Eating disorders are medical conditions; they are not a lifestyle choice. They affect your body's ability to get proper nutrition. This can lead to health issues, such as heart and kidney problems, or sometimes even death. But there are treatments that can help.

What are the types of eating disorders?

Anorexia nervosa.

Bulimia nervosa.

Binge eating disorder.

Avoidant or restrictive food intake disorder.

Pica.

Rumination.

Other specified feeding and eating disorders:

Purging disorder.

Night eating syndrome.

Atypical anorexia nervosa.

Subthreshold bulimia nervosa

binge eating disorder.

Orthorexia.

MYTH: Eating disorders are a choice. **FACT:** They are serious mental illnesses with biological and psychological roots.

MYTH: Only teen girls get eating disorders. **FACT:** People of all ages, genders, and backgrounds are affected.

MYTH: It's just about food or appearance. **FACT:** Eating disorders are about control, coping, and emotional pain.

MYTH: You can't fully recover. **FACT: Full recovery is possible** with early intervention and evidence-based care.

MYTH: You can tell who has an eating disorder by looking at them. **FACT:** Most people with eating disorders do not appear underweight.

Genetics: Studies found that anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder run in families. You can inherit genetic traits from your biological family that make you more likely to develop the condition.

Brain biology: Dopamine and serotonin are chemicals in your brain. They make you feel things like pleasure and happiness. Research suggests that these chemicals activate during certain eating disorder behaviors.

Cultural and social ideals: Pressure to “fit in” can affect your mental health and change your patterns of behavior to meet certain, often unrealistic, goals set by others. In the digital era, social media, television and movies may also influence your self-esteem if you feel you don't look like the people you follow or admire.

Underlying mental health conditions: You may use extreme measures around food when you feel like other aspects of your life are hard to manage. An obsession with food becomes an unhealthy way of coping with painful emotions or feelings. As a result, some eating disorders happen alongside other mental health conditions.

Food is an enemy or it can harm you.

You did something wrong or shameful after eating food.

You aren't at the correct weight or body size.

You're “failing” if you don't meet certain weight or food requirements.

Other people negatively perceive you.

What and how you eat is the only thing in your life that you can control.

You don't want to spend time with others for fear of judgment.

Recovery Quotes

“Food is something I am going to have to face at least three times a day for the rest of my life. And I am not perfect. But one really bad day does not mean that I am hopeless and back at square one with my eating disorder. Olympic ice skaters fall in their quest for the gold. Heisman Trophy winners throw interceptions. Professional singers forget the words. And people with eating disorders sometimes slip back into an old pattern. But all of these individuals just pick themselves back up and do the next right thing. The ice skater makes the next jump. The football player throws the next pass. The singer finishes the song. And I am going to eat breakfast.”- Jenni Schaefer

"I'm on a journey to discover what it's like to be free of all demons." - Demi Lovato

“Don’t let food be the boss of you. Not today. Not ever again.” - unknown

“Recovery is also not a smooth, straight road. I have to continuously choose recovery every single day, multiple times a day. It isn’t easy, and some days I fail, I won’t lie. It took so many years to learn it’s okay to take up space, it’s okay to eat a lot of food, and it’s OKAY to slip! It’s a part of the recovery process and you just need to accept it, move forward and find better ways for next time to prevent it.”- unknown

“The minute you think of giving up, think of the reason why you held on so long.” - Unknown

“Your weight may change but your worth does not.” - Unknown

“Stop spending all day obsessing, cursing, perfecting your body like it’s all you’ve got to offer the world. Your body is not your art, it’s your paintbrush. Whether your paintbrush is a tall paintbrush or a thin paintbrush or a stocky paintbrush or a scratched up paintbrush is completely irrelevant. What is relevant is that YOU HAVE A PAINTBRUSH which can be used to transfer your insides onto the canvas of your life — where others can see it and be inspired and comforted by it.” - Glennon Doyle

“Feeling guilty for eating when you're hungry is like feeling for breathing when your lungs need oxygen. We've literally been taught to be ashamed of our basic human needs. Refuse to feel the shame. You are allowed to eat.” - Unknown

“Watch a movie that makes you laugh or listen to a song that makes you cry. Embrace your emotions and be proud of what you feel.” – Demi Lovato

“The more you hide your feelings, the more they show. The more you deny your feelings, the more they grow.” – Unknown

“I am beginning to measure myself in strength, not pounds. Sometimes in smiles.” – Laurie Halse Anderson

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 1

The Oregon coast was beautiful, but today, the gray mist hanging over the Pacific felt like it was trapped inside my bedroom. I rolled over, my limbs feeling heavy, my head throbbing from a night of tossing and turning. I jolted upright as the realization hit: today was supposed to be my first day at Waterfront High. I had only been with Ellie and Simon for a month. They were rich—the kind of rich that meant I had a bedroom larger than the apartment I grew up in, a walk-in closet, and mirrors everywhere. I liked the house, but I wasn't used to seeing myself so clearly. I dragged myself out of bed and stepped into the walk-in closet. The mirror on the door caught me off guard. For the first time, in the harsh morning light of this expensive life, I didn't see a "curvy" girl or just "me." I saw someone... fat. The word felt like a physical blow. I ignored the image, reaching for my new school uniform, when I heard Ellie's voice drifting up the stairs. "Honey! You're not going to school yet. We have that doctor's appointment first!" I sighed, dropping the pleated skirt. I pulled on a pair of black leggings and a cozy sweater, but when I caught my reflection again, the leggings seemed to highlight every curve I suddenly hated. I felt exposed. I swapped them for baggy sweatpants, hoping the fabric would swallow me whole. In the bathroom, I pulled my hair back into a low ponytail. My face looked round—chubby. I wanted to scream, but instead, I took a deep breath and headed down. The Seed is Planted Ellie and Simon were at the marble kitchen island. They looked perfect, like people out of a catalog. I sat down, my phone already in my hand. I needed a fix for the person I saw in the mirror. I typed "how to lose weight fast" into the search bar. Deep in the results, I saw a link: anathins.org. I clicked. The screen was filled with images of girls who looked like glass—limbs so thin they seemed ready to snap, collarbones like wings. The word "WELCOME" glowed in a soft font. I felt a strange pull, a sense of belonging I hadn't felt in the foster system. I bookmarked it and snapped the tab shut just as Ellie spoke. "Hi sweetie, how was your night?" she asked, her voice light. "Fine," I replied, my heart still racing from the images on the screen. The drive to the doctor's office was quiet until we reached the parking lot. Sage—the nickname Ellie preferred—turned to me. She looked at me with a mix of pity and "helpfulness" that made my skin crawl. "Sweetie," she said softly, "you're getting a little fat, don't you think? Maybe you should go on a diet." The words felt like a confirmation of the mirror's judgment. "Yeah," I whispered. "I'll think about it." Inside the clinic, the air smelled of antiseptic and cold reality. A nurse led us back. "Step on the scale, please." I stepped up. The metal felt cold. The nurse slid the weights across the bar until they balanced. 250 lbs. She frowned, making a quick, sharp note on the clipboard. Then came the height: 5'3". In the small exam room, I sat on the crinkly paper of the table. Every move I made seemed to create a sound that announced my size. I felt like an intruder in my own body. The doctor entered, a tall man with spectacles and a clinical air. He looked at the chart, then at me, then back at the chart. He didn't smile. "So," he began, "we've got some concerns here. At 250 pounds and five-foot-three, your BMI is in a range that we need to address immediately. If we don't get this under control, you're looking at a very high risk for pre-diabetes, joint issues, and cardiovascular strain." He looked over his glasses at Sage. "Maybe she should go on a diet. In fact, she needs to lose some weight." I looked down at my stomach, trying to suck it in, wondering how I hadn't noticed how "wrong" I was until this very moment. It was like everyone had been seeing a monster while I thought I was just a girl. I look down at my stomach and try to suck it in wondering how I didn't notice, I realized then that "Ana" wasn't just a search term. It felt like a person standing in the corner of the exam room, whispering that she had the solution to the doctor's warning. was to Control, restriction, and I slipped my phone into my pocket, the metal casing feeling cold against my leg. When the door handle turned and my mom walked back in with a concerned expression, I didn't look up. I just kept my stomach sucked in, wondering how many meals I could skip before anyone would notice I was following the "tips" I'd just bookmarked. In the car door shut with a heavy thud, sealing us into a small, pressurized box of silence. My mom didn't start the engine right away. She just gripped the steering wheel at ten and two, her knuckles a pale, ghostly white. I stared out the passenger window, watching a stray plastic bag tumble across the clinic parking lot. I was hyper-aware of the seat belt pressing against my waist. I shifted in my seat, trying to sit taller, trying to make myself feel less... present. "So," my mom finally said, her voice sounding forced and bright. "That was a lot to take in. How are you feeling about what Dr. Aris said?" "Fine," I lied. The word felt like cardboard in my mouth. "He's just concerned about your labs," she continued, glancing over at me. "It's not a big deal, really. We just have to make some 'lifestyle adjustments.' We can start looking at some low-carb recipes tonight. Maybe go for a walk after dinner?" I nodded, but I wasn't really listening to her plan. In my head, I was mentally re-reading the list I'd seen on the website. Rule #1: If you're hungry, drink a glass of water and wait 20 minutes. Rule #2: Never eat more than 500 calories. My mom's idea of a "healthy walk" felt like child's play compared to the cold, hard math I was already starting to do. "I'm not really hungry for dinner anyway," I said, testing the waters. My

heart hammered against my ribs. It was the first time I'd ever said it out loud with the intention of it being a lie. My mom paused, her hand on the gear shift. She looked at me for a second too long, her brow furrowing. "You have to eat, honey. We just have to eat differently." "I know," I said quickly, forcing a small smile to put her at ease. "I just meant I had a big lunch." As we pulled out of the parking lot, I pulled my phone out and felt the familiar weight of it. I didn't open the browser, but I tapped the edge of the screen. I felt like I had a secret weapon in my pocket—a way to fix the "problem" the doctor had pointed out before anyone else could comment on it again. When we got home, the kitchen felt different. It no longer felt like a place for snacks or comfort; it felt like a laboratory where every movement was being watched. My mom started moving around the island, pulling out bags of spinach and lean proteins, her face set in a look of determined "helpfulness." I retreated to my room under the guise of doing homework. I sat on the edge of my bed and opened a fresh note on my phone. I titled it something boring—"Bio Notes"—so no one would think to click it. Then, I started the math. Goal: 100 calories left for today. Total Consumed: 0. Weight: (I'd have to check the scale in the bathroom when Mom went to bed). I scrolled back to the website. One of the users had posted that "the feeling of hunger is just your body eating its own fat." I stared at those words until they felt like a mantra. Every time my stomach growled, I whispered it to myself. It's just progress. It's just the body fixing itself. "Dinner's ready!" my mom called from downstairs. My stomach gave a sharp, painful twist of anticipation, but I ignored it. I stood up, smoothed my shirt to make sure it didn't cling to my middle, and headed down. The table was set with grilled chicken and a mountain of steamed broccoli. No rice. No bread. My mom was taking the doctor's "diet" advice seriously. Usually, I would have complained about the lack of carbs, but tonight, I saw it as a head start. "I made plenty of greens," she said, piling my plate high. "Dr. Aris said volume is good, as long as it's the right kind of food." I picked up my fork, my hands shaking slightly. I looked at the chicken. I knew it was protein, but the website said everything had a cost. Chicken (3 oz) = 140 calories. Broccoli = 30 calories. I began to move the food around, a tactic I'd read about only an hour ago. I cut the chicken into tiny, microscopic pieces. I spread the broccoli out so it covered the entire surface of the plate, making it look like I'd eaten more than I had. "Is it okay?" Mom asked, watching me closely. "Yeah," I said, taking a tiny bite of a stalk. "I'm just really tired from the long day. Not super hungry." Every time she looked down at her own plate, I took a piece of chicken and hid it under a pile of broccoli stalks I knew I wouldn't finish. Or I'd wait for her to look away and quickly spit a chewed piece into my napkin. "I'm proud of you for being so mature about this," she said softly, reaching across the table to pat my hand. "I know it's a big change." The guilt hit me for a second—a sharp, cold sting. She thought I was being "mature" and "healthy." She didn't know that under the table, I was clenching my fist, counting the seconds until I could go back upstairs and delete those calories from my mental tally. I wasn't changing my lifestyle; I was starting a war. The "Bio Notes" entry on my phone felt like a heavy secret, but it wasn't enough. Even though I had pushed half the chicken around and hidden the rest, the few bites I did swallow felt like lead in my stomach. I could feel the calories settling in, turning into the "pre-diabetes" the doctor warned me about. Every time I breathed out, I felt the expansion of my ribs against my shirt. I felt... thick. "I'm gonna go head up and shower, Mom," I said, keeping my voice steady despite the frantic thumping in my chest. "Okay, honey. Get some rest. You did great tonight." Her praise felt like a physical weight. I hurried upstairs and locked the bathroom door, the click of the bolt sounding like a starting pistol. I turned the shower on full blast—hot, steaming, and most importantly, loud. The roar of the water against the plastic tub provided the perfect cover. I knelt on the cold tile, the humidity of the room making my skin feel sticky. I'd read how to do it on the forums. They called it "purging," a word that sounded like cleaning, like starting over. The first time, my body fought back. My eyes watered, and my throat burned with a sharp, acidic sting. I felt a wave of pure, instinctive panic as my stomach cramped, but then I thought of the doctor's "Hmm" and the way he looked at my chart. I thought of the "thinspo" photos of girls with hipbones like knives. When it was over, I slumped against the side of the tub, shaking. My throat felt raw, and my face was flushed and sweaty. I rinsed my mouth out quickly, scrubbing my tongue with my toothbrush until the taste of bile was replaced by artificial mint. I stood up and looked in the mirror. My eyes were bloodshot, but for the first time since leaving the clinic, the panic had quieted down. I felt empty. I pulled my phone out with trembling fingers and updated the "Bio Notes." Dinner: 100 calories. Adjustment: Purged. Net: 0. I stared at the 0. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I felt a strange, intoxicating sense of power. The doctor wanted me to lose weight? Fine. I would do it faster and better than he ever expected. I climbed into the shower, letting the hot water wash away the scent of the bathroom floor, already planning how I'd get out of breakfast tomorrow. The morning air felt thinner, colder. My throat was a raw, scratchy reminder of the night before, a secret ache that I carried like a trophy. I hadn't eaten breakfast—I'd told my mom I grabbed a protein bar on the way out, a lie that felt dangerously easy to tell. By the time I reached my locker, the "empty" feeling wasn't just in my stomach; it was a humming vibration in my limbs. I felt light, almost like I was floating above the linoleum tiles. "Hey, look, it's the human eclipse." The voice belonged to Chloe, a girl who seemed to exist solely to remind me of my own space in the world. She was leaning against the locker bank with two others, her eyes raking over me with a look of pure, filtered disgust. "I think she's wearing a bigger sweatshirt today,"

her friend whispered, just loud enough for me to hear. "Probably needs it to hide the buffet she had for breakfast." kept my head down, my fingers fumbling with my lock. Usually, I'd have a comeback, or at least a surge of anger. But today, their words didn't just hurt—they confirmed everything. The doctor was right. Chloe was right. My body was an apology I had to make for existing. "Careful, don't walk too fast," Chloe called out as I shouldered my bag. "You might cause an earthquake." A few people nearby snickered. I felt that familiar heat rising in my neck, the urge to cry fighting with the urge to disappear. I ducked into a bathroom stall, the only place I felt safe, and sat on the closed toilet lid. My hands were shaking as I pulled out my phone. My thumb moved instinctively to the bookmarked page. I didn't want to see my friends' TikToks or my mom's "checking in" texts. I needed the one place where no one would laugh at me for being "too much." I scrolled through the forum. "People are mean because they're jealous of your discipline," one post read. "Hunger is the only thing that won't betray you," said another. I felt a strange, chilling sense of relief. Chloe hated me. The doctor pitied me. My mom was trying to "fix" me. But "Ana"? Ana understood me. The website didn't see a girl with a pre-diabetes scare; it saw a girl with potential. It saw a girl who could be "perfect" if she just worked hard enough. I typed a small message into the comment box of a thread titled 'Daily Motivation': "Started today. 0 so far. People at school are being cruel, but I'm using it as fuel." Within seconds, a notification popped up. A tiny heart icon. A comment from a user named LillyWhite: "Stay strong, butterfly. We're the only ones who know the truth. They want you to stay big so they feel better. Don't let them win." I leaned my head against the cold metal wall of the stall. A tear tracked down my cheek, but I wiped it away quickly. I wasn't alone anymore. I had a community. I had a goal. And for the first time in my life, I felt like I was finally in control of the girl in the mirror. The lunchroom was a battlefield of smells. Toasted bread, greasy fries, the sugary scent of fruit cups—it all hit me like a physical wall as I walked through the double doors. My stomach gave a loud, hollow growl, but instead of panicking, I felt a rush of cold, crystalline pride. I am stronger than a sound, I thought. I sat at our usual table with my friends, Maya and Sarah. I had an unopened bag of carrot sticks and a bottle of water in front of me. This was the "victory" I had been planning since second period. "Is that all you're eating?" Maya asked, frowning at my meager pile of orange sticks. "I thought you liked the taco salads on Tuesdays." I felt the "Ana" voice whisper in the back of my mind, ready with the script. "Ugh, I had such a huge breakfast," I said, rolling my eyes perfectly. "My mom went overboard with pancakes. I'm honestly still stuffed. I'm just eating these so I don't get a headache." "Lucky," Sarah sighed, biting into a slice of pizza. "I wish I could skip lunch. I feel like a whale today." I looked at Sarah's pizza—the glistening cheese, the thick crust. Normally, my mouth would have watered. But now, all I saw was a trap. Every bite she took was a step backward, while every minute I sat there empty-handed was a step toward the "butterfly" LillyWhite had promised I could be. chloe walked past our table, pausing just long enough to glance at my tray. She didn't say anything this time, but the look of surprise in her eyes when she saw I wasn't eating was better than any apology. She expected me to be the girl who finished her fries and reached for a cookie. Seeing her confusion felt like winning a trophy. I took one carrot stick. I bit off the tiniest tip, chewed it forty times—counting every single grind of my teeth—and then swallowed. 1 calorie, I logged mentally. Maybe 2. I took a long, slow sip of water, feeling it fill the empty space in my ribs. The water felt heavy and cold, a shield against the hunger. As the bell rang, my friends stood up, complaining about being "food comatose" and sleepy. I stood up and felt a sudden, sharp wave of dizziness. The room tilted for a second, the fluorescent lights blurring into long streaks of white. I had to grab the edge of the table to keep from swaying.

"You okay?" Maya asked, reaching out a hand. "Yeah," I breathed, steadying myself. "Just a head rush. Stood up too fast." But as I walked out of the cafeteria, leaving my nearly full bag of carrots in the trash, I felt an incredible, soaring high. I had survived forty minutes surrounded by food and hadn't succumbed. I was empty. I was light. I was winning a game that no one else even knew we were playing. I ducked into the hallway and pulled out my phone, quickly typing into my "Bio Notes":

Lunch: 2 calories (carrot).

Feeling: Powerful.

I felt like a ghost walking through the crowded halls—invisible, untouchable, and finally, for the first time in my life, successful.

CHAPTER 2

The high of the school day began to curdle into a dull, throbbing ache by the time the bus dropped me off. The dizziness was constant now, a flickering at the edges of my vision that made the sidewalk seem to roll like the ocean.

I didn't go into the kitchen when I got home. I couldn't risk the smell of whatever "healthy" snack my mom had waiting. Instead, I bypassed the living room and went straight to my bedroom, locking the door with a quiet click.

The website said that every calorie was a debt that had to be paid. My "Bio Notes" said I was at 2 calories, but in my mind, those two calories were like lead weights sitting in my stomach. I had to get rid of them.

I stripped down to my underwear and stood in front of the full-length mirror. I didn't see the "pre-diabetic" girl the doctor saw, and I didn't see the "eclipse" Chloe saw. I saw a project. I saw someone who was finally, finally taking up less space. I poked at my hip bones, searching for the sharp edges I knew were hiding under the skin. I couldn't go for a run—my mom would ask questions—so I did what the forums suggested.

Jumping Jacks: 100 (silent, landing on the balls of my feet so the floor wouldn't creak).

Crunches: 50 (on the rug to muffle the sound).

Wall Sits: Until my legs shook so violently I collapsed Every time my heart hammered against my ribs, I felt a twisted sense of relief. Burn it off. Erase the day. Become nothing.

A soft knock on the door made me jump. I scrambled to pull on a baggy oversized hoodie, my breath coming in ragged, shallow gasps. I didn't go down for the cauliflower pizza. The very idea of the "healthy" crust—the smell of the cheese, the way the grease might feel on my fingers—made a wave of genuine nausea roll through me. It wasn't just the eating; it was the performance of eating that I couldn't handle tonight. I waited until I heard the floorboards creak outside my door again. "Dinner's getting cold," Mom called, her tone a mix of encouragement and that new, hovering worry she'd developed. I slumped onto my bed, pulling the duvet up to my chin. I made sure my voice sounded thin and strained. "Mom? I don't think I can eat tonight. My stomach is really cramping up... I think I might have caught that bug going around school." The door opened an inch. My mom peered in, her face etched with concern. "Oh no. Is it the pizza? Is it the new diet?" "No, I think it's just... a fever," I lied, closing my eyes and trying to look as small as possible under the blankets. "I just need to sleep it off. Please don't make me smell food. It makes it worse." She sighed, a sound of pure defeat. "Okay, honey. I'll leave some ginger ale by the door. Call me if you need anything."

As soon as her footsteps faded, I sat up. The "illness" was a mask, but the relief was real. I was safe. I didn't have to hide food in napkins or chew until my jaw ached. I had successfully bought myself another sixteen hours of emptiness. I reached for my phone, the screen brightness turned all the way down. I went straight to the group chat I'd joined on the site. Me: Successfully faked a stomach flu. Escaped dinner. Net total for the day: 2 calories.

LillyWhite: Legend. That's the easiest way to get them off your back. Just don't do it too many days in a row or they'll bring you back to the doctor.

The mention of the doctor made my heart skip a beat. I couldn't go back there. I couldn't let him put me on a scale and see that the numbers were dropping. He'd think he "fixed" my pre-diabetes, but he'd look at me with those clinical eyes and realize I'd found a different way to break. I stood up and walked to the bathroom, not turning on the light. I let the glow from the hallway guide me. I lifted my hoodie and ran my hands over my stomach. It felt flatter, colder. The "bulge" I'd seen in the doctor's office felt like a bad dream.

I stared at my reflection in the dark. I looked still looked fat, and I felt a surge of intoxicating sadness, I wasn't becoming the girl who had potential for nothingness.

I climbed back into bed, my limbs feeling heavy like lead but my head feeling light as a balloon. As I drifted off, the last thing I thought about wasn't the pain in my throat or the ache in my heart—it was the number on the scale I planned to see tomorrow morning. I didn't go down for the cauliflower pizza. The very idea of the "healthy" crust—the smell of the cheese, the way the grease might feel on my fingers—made a wave of genuine nausea roll through me. It wasn't just eating; it was the performance of eating that I couldn't handle tonight.

The next morning I jump out of bed and sneak to the bathroom to look at the scale The house was silent, the kind of stillness that only exists at five in the morning. I crept into the bathroom, my bare feet freezing on the tile. My heart was thumping so hard I could feel it in my throat—this was the moment of truth. This was the only grade that mattered now.

I placed the scale on the flattest part of the floor, making sure it didn't wobble. I held my breath, stepped on, and stood perfectly still. I didn't even want my hair to move.

The digital numbers flickered, a taunting dance of red light, before finally locking in.

243.0

I stared at it until the display timed out and went black. I had started at 250 only a few days ago. Seven pounds. Seven pounds of "pre-diabetes," seven pounds of Chloe's insults, seven pounds of the girl I hated—gone. Just like that.

I felt a rush of adrenaline so powerful it made me dizzy. The hunger pains that had kept me awake half the night suddenly felt like a small price to pay for this kind of magic. If I could lose seven pounds in a few days, I could lose twenty in a month. I could be a whole different person by the end of the semester.

The Distorted Reality

I leaned over the sink, splashing cold water on my face. My reflection looked the same—still too much, still "the eclipse"—but the scale didn't lie. The scale was the only thing that told me the truth.

"Seven pounds is a start," the voice in my head whispered. "But it's not enough. You're still over two hundred. You're still the biggest girl in the hall."

The pride I felt curdled slightly. The victory was sweet, but it was also a warning. If I ate today—if I even touched the "healthy" breakfast my mom was undoubtedly preparing—that 243 would crawl back up to 244. Then 245. The thought sent a jolt of pure terror through me pulled out my phone and updated the "Bio Notes."

Starting Weight: 250

Current Weight: 243

Lost: 7 lbs

New Goal: 230 by next Monday.

I went back to the forum and posted the update. Within minutes, the notifications started buzzing.

SkinnyLegend99: 7 lbs?! Teach me your ways! That's incredible discipline. ButterflyDreamer: Don't stop now. The first ten are the hardest, then your body starts to eat itself for real. Stay strong.

I headed back to my room to get dressed for school. I chose the biggest, baggiest hoodie I owned—not to hide my body from Chloe this time, but to hide my secret from the world. I wasn't sick, and I didn't have a bug. I was finally, for the first time in my life, good at something.

Private Message (Inbox)

From: ButterflyDreamer Subject: Checking in

Hey, I saw your post about losing 7 pounds. Just wanted to say—don't let it scare you. It's just your old self-leaving. When the hunger gets loud, just drink a liter of ice water as fast as you can. It shocks the stomach. You have the kind of discipline most people on this board only dream of. Don't let a single bite ruin your streak. You're becoming light as air.

Private Message (Inbox) From:thinlove

Subject: Re: Checking in

Thanks for saying that. I needed to hear it today. My hands were actually shaking while I was looking at the fridge, but I did exactly what you said—the ice water worked. It's like a reset button. I don't want to be that "old self" anymore; she was heavy and slow. I want to be like you. Seeing the numbers drop is the only thing that makes me feel like I'm in control. I won't break the streak. I promise.

Private Message (Inbox) From: ButterflyDreamer Subject: Re: Checking in

I'm so proud of you. I can almost feel your strength through the screen.

That shaking? That's just the power returning to you. It's the feeling of your body realizing it doesn't need to be a slave to cravings anymore. Most people are terrified of that feeling, so they run to the kitchen to drown it out. But you? You stood your ground.

Don't be scared of the dizziness or the cold, either. It's just your body becoming more efficient, shedding the things that used to weigh you down. Think of yourself like a marble statue—the sculptor has to chip away the heavy, rough parts to find the masterpiece inside.

Check in with me tomorrow morning before you step on the scale. I want to be the first one you tell when you see that new low. We're in this together now. Stay focused. Stay hollow.

Private Message (Inbox) From: thinlove

Subject: Re: Checking in

"Stay hollow." I've been whispering that to myself all morning. It's the only thing that stopped me from listening to the noise in my head.

I hit a new low on the scale today. Another 1.4 pounds gone. When I saw the number, I actually started crying—not because I was sad, but because for the first time, I felt like I was actually winning. I'm finally starting to see the person I was always supposed to be. My collarbones are sharper today, and I spent ten minutes just tracing them in the mirror.

I'm a little shaky, and my hands are freezing even with the heater on, but I don't care. The cold just means it's working, right? My mom kept staring at me during coffee, asking why I looked so "pale," but she has no idea what I'm achieving. She'd just try to ruin it with a "healthy" meal.

I'm going to go for a long walk now to keep the momentum going. I'll have my water with me. Thank you for seeing me when no one else does. I won't let you down—I promise I'll be even lighter tomorrow.

The three blocks to school felt twice as long as they had just a week ago. Her backpack, which only held a few notebooks and a laptop, felt like a hiker's rucksack, the straps digging into shoulders that were becoming increasingly bony.

The morning sun was blindingly bright, reflecting off the windshields of cars in a way that made her head throb. About halfway there, she felt that familiar, creeping static at the edges of her eyes. Her heart began to thud—not the strong beat of a runner, but a hollow, frantic tapping against her ribs.

She slowed down, her sneakers dragging slightly on the pavement. She reached into her side pocket and gripped the liter of ice water. The plastic was slick with condensation, freezing her palm. She didn't stop to drink; she just pressed the cold bottle against her pulse point on her neck, desperate to "shock" herself back into focus.

Stay hollow, she whispered. Just a few more steps.

When she finally reached the school's front steps, the world tilted. She had to grab the handrail, her knuckles turning white. A group of freshmen jogged past her, their energy feeling loud and abrasive. For a second, her vision went completely grey, a swarm of dark spots dancing in the center of her sight. She lowered her head, pretending to tie her shoe so no one would see her swaying.

She waited. One breath. Two.

Slowly, the grey receded, leaving behind a dull, metallic taste in her mouth. Her legs felt like straw, but she forced them to straighten.

She made it through the heavy double doors and into the hallway. The linoleum floors were a blur of reflected fluorescent lights, but she was inside. She felt a twisted sense of triumph. She was starving, she was exhausted, and her head was spinning—but she was still "winning."

As she reached her locker, she pulled out her phone. Her hands were still trembling, making it hard to type, but she had to let ButterflyDreamer know.

To: ButterflyDreamer I made it. It was a little rough—the walk felt like a mountain and I almost went down at the gate—but I used the water trick and pushed through. I'm at my locker now. I feel so light, Butterfly. Almost like I'm not even touching the floor.

From: ButterflyDreamer Subject: Re: I made it

I knew you could do it. That "floating" feeling? That's the goal. That's the feeling of your spirit finally winning the war against your body.

Most people spend their whole lives anchored to the ground by their own greed, but you're breaking free. The dizziness is just your old self trying to pull you back down—don't let it. When the world goes grey, just remember that you're becoming something pure. Something perfect.

I'm so glad the water trick worked. Keep that bottle with you like a shield. If anyone tries to tempt you today, or if the "noise" in the cafeteria gets too loud, just take a sip and remember: they're eating because they're weak. You're empty because you're strong.

You're doing so well, my little butterfly. You're almost there. Just stay disciplined through the afternoon. I'll be waiting for your update tonight.

CHAPTER 3

The wood of the staircase groaned under her feet as she scrambled upward, each step sending a jolt of vertigo through her head. She didn't look back to see the expression on Ellie's face—she couldn't afford to. If she saw the tears she knew were pooling in her mother's eyes, the "hollow" wall might crumble.

She reached the landing, ducked into her room, and slammed the door with a force that rattled the frames on the hallway walls. The click of the lock was the only sound that made her feel safe. She sank to the floor, her back against the wood, gasping for air that felt too thin to breathe. Her heart was a frantic bird trapped in a cage of ribs.

In the kitchen, the silence that followed the slam was heavy and suffocating. Ellie stood frozen by the butcher-block island, her hand still holding the ladle she'd been using for the soup. The savory steam rose around her, but it felt like a mockery now.

She looked at the empty doorway where her daughter had just been—a girl who was becoming a ghost right in front of her. She remembered the day she had officially adopted her, the promise she had made to protect her from the world. Now, the threat wasn't coming from outside; it was coming from within.

Ellie's hands shook as she set the ladle down and reached for her phone. She didn't call a friend. She didn't call her husband. She scrolled through her contacts until she hit the letter D.

The phone rang three times before a receptionist picked up.

"Pediatric Associates, how can I help you?"

"Hi," Ellie said, her voice cracking. She cleared her throat, trying to sound like the composed mother she usually was.

"This is Ellie goodfellow. I need to make an urgent appointment for my daughter, Isabella goodfellow. As soon as possible. Tomorrow morning, if you have anything."

"Is there a specific concern, Mrs. goodfellow?"

Ellie looked up at the ceiling, toward the room where her daughter was currently hiding. "She's... she's not eating. She's lost a lot of weight very quickly, and she's dizzy, and her skin is gray. I think... I think it's an emergency."

"We have an opening at 8:15 AM. Can you get her here?"

"I'll get her there," Ellie whispered, her eyes hardening with a mix of fear and fierce maternal love. "One way or another, I'll get her there."

Ellie knocked on the door, her voice was strained with a forced cheerfulness that made Isabella's skin crawl. "Bella? Time to get up, honey. We have an appointment."

Isabella stood up too fast. The room didn't just tilt—it dissolved. She grabbed the edge of her dresser, her knuckles white, waiting for the world to stop vibrating. She dressed in layers, hiding her frame under an oversized hoodie, her movements slow and mechanical.

She opened her door and saw Ellie waiting at the top of the stairs, car keys already in hand. Ellie looked like she hadn't slept either. "I'm not going," Isabella said, her voice a dry rasp. "I told you, I'm just tired. I don't need a doctor to tell me I have a flu or whatever this is."

"It's not an option, Bella," Ellie said, stepping toward her. "Look at you. You're shaking. You can barely stand."

"I can stand fine!" Isabella snapped. She took a defiant step forward to prove it. She wanted to show her mom she was strong, that she was "light as air," that she was finally in control.

She reached the top step, and suddenly, the light from the hallway window became an explosion of white. The sound of Ellie's voice drifted away, replaced by a roar like a distant ocean.

Isabella felt her knees give out, but she didn't feel the pain of the impact. It was as if her body had finally decided it was tired of carrying her.

"Bella? Bella!"

Ellie's scream sounded miles away. Isabella's hand reached out for the railing, but her fingers were numb, useless. She slumped forward, her shoulder hitting the wall before she slid down onto the carpet.

The world went black.

When Isabella's eyes fluttered open, she was on her back. The ceiling was spinning. Ellie was hovering over her, her face white with terror, her phone pressed to her ear.

"...she just collapsed! She's breathing, but she's so cold. Please, just send someone!"

Isabella tried to speak, tried to tell her mom that she was fine, that she just needed a sip of ice water to "shock" the system. But her jaw felt like lead. Ellie sat on the hallway floor, Isabella's head cradled in her lap. The girl felt impossibly light. Her skin was a translucent, sickly grey, and her breathing was so shallow that Ellie found herself leaning down every few

seconds just to feel the faint puff of air against her cheek.

"Stay with me, Bella. Come on, baby, open your eyes," Ellie whispered, her voice trembling.

The sirens were a distant wail in the neighborhood, still too far away. Her hands were shaking so violently she could barely operate her phone, but she knew she had to clear the path. She hit redial on the doctor's office.

"Pediatric Associates, how can—"

"It's Ellie Goodfellow," she interrupted, her voice tight and breathless. "I... I called earlier for the 8:15. For Isabella."

"Yes, Mrs. Goodfellow, are you on your way?"

"No," Ellie choked out, a sob finally breaking through. She looked down at Isabella's limp hand, the fingers curled like dried petals. "We're not coming. She just... she collapsed. She's unconscious. I'm waiting for the paramedics now."

The line went silent for a heartbeat before the receptionist's tone shifted from professional to deeply concerned. "I understand. I'll alert the doctor immediately. Do you need me to stay on the line until they arrive?"

"No," Ellie said, watching the shadows of emergency lights begin to flicker against the hallway wallpaper. "They're here. I have to go."

She disconnected the call and dropped the phone.

The front door burst open, and the house was suddenly flooded with the heavy boots of paramedics and the mechanical hum of a gurney.

"Over here!" Ellie shouted, her voice echoing in the stairwell. "She's right here!"

As they swarmed around Isabella, checking pulses and barking vitals into their radios, Ellie stood back, her back pressed against the wall.

The ride to the hospital was a blur of strobing red lights and the rhythmic, hollow thud of the ambulance tires. Ellie followed in her own car, her hands gripping the steering wheel so hard the plastic creaked. She kept seeing the image of Isabella's head lolling back as the paramedics lifted her—the girl she had raised, now reduced to a series of numbers on a monitor: heart rate, blood pressure, temperature. All of them are too low.

The hospital smelled of industrial bleach and stale coffee. Ellie paced the small square of the private consultation room until the door finally clicked open.

Dr. Aris stepped in, holding a chart. He didn't offer a polite smile; his face was etched with the gravity of someone who had seen this a hundred times but still hated it.

"Is she awake?" Ellie blurted out before he could speak.

"She's conscious, but she's very weak," Dr. Aris said, sitting across from her. He sighed, looking down at the labs. "Mrs. Miller, Isabella's heart rate is in the low 40s. Her electrolytes are dangerously imbalanced, and her kidneys are showing signs of stress. This wasn't just a dizzy spell."

Ellie felt the air leave her lungs. "She told me she was just stressed. She said she had a flu..."

"I'm afraid it's more significant than that," the doctor interrupted gently. "Based on her physical state, the rapid weight loss, and the bradycardia, we are diagnosing Isabella with Anorexia Nervosa. She has been severely restricting her intake for quite some time."

Ellie flinched as if he'd slapped her. The words felt ugly and cold in the sterile room. "I should have seen it. I tried to feed her, but she..."

"These disorders are incredibly secretive, Ellie," Dr. Aris said, leaning forward. "They often involve a level of obsession and outside influence that is hard for a parent to penetrate. She isn't just 'dieting.' Her brain is in a state of starvation, which changes her perception of reality. To her, the hunger isn't a warning—it's a goal."

"What happens now?" Ellie asked, her voice a hollow shell.

"We've started her on a slow refeeding protocol and put her in adolescent inpatient treatment plus start her on IV fluids to stabilize her heart," Dr. Aris explained. "But the physical part is only half the battle. This is a psychological crisis as much as a medical one. She's going to need intensive therapy, and she's going to need her family to be her anchor."

The first thing Isabella noticed wasn't the light, but the sound. A rhythmic, high-pitched ping... ping... ping... that seemed to echo inside her skull. Every time it beeped, a sharp throb pulsed behind her eyes.

She tried to move her arm, but it felt like it was made of stone. When she looked down, her breath hitched. A clear plastic tube was taped to the back of her hand, snaking up to a bag of fluid hanging on a metal pole. They're putting things into me, she thought, a cold spike of panic piercing through her lethargy. They're ruining it.

The door to the room was cracked open just a few inches. From the hallway, she heard the low, muffled murmur of voices. She recognized Ellie's jagged, tearful tone and the calm, clinical bass of the doctor.

"She's stable for the moment," the doctor was saying, "but her heart is under immense strain. We can't let her go home like this, Ellie. It's too dangerous."

"What does 'inpatient' actually mean?" Ellie's voice sounded small, like it was coming from a great distance.

"It means 24-hour supervision," the doctor replied. "It means a locked unit where she can't exercise, where every meal is monitored. We have to break the cycle of the disorder before her organs start to fail. If we don't admit her to the residential program now, the next collapse could be fatal."

Isabella's heart hammered against her ribs—ping-ping-ping-ping—the monitor betraying her fear. A locked unit?

The door creaked open, and the light from the hallway spilled across the linoleum floor like a cold, accusing finger. Ellie entered first, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen, followed by the doctor, who held a clipboard like a shield.

The monitor above Isabella's bed began to chirp faster—ping-ping-ping-ping—mirroring the frantic rhythm of her heart.

"Bella," Ellie whispered, reaching out to touch Isabella's hand, the one without the IV. Isabella flinched, pulling her fingers away.

"I heard you," Isabella rasped, her voice catching in her dry throat. "I'm not going to a locked ward. I'm not a prisoner. Mom, tell him. Tell him I'll eat at home. I'll have the soup, I promise."

Ellie looked at the doctor, her lower lip trembling, before looking back at her daughter. "We passed that point this morning, Bella. When you fell... I thought you were gone. I can't do this at home. I'm not a doctor, and I can't watch you disappear anymore."

Dr. Aris stepped forward, his voice firm but devoid of malice. "Isabella, your body is in a state of emergency. Your heart rate is dangerously low because your muscles are being used for fuel. If we let you walk out of here, we'd be letting you die."

"I'm fine! I just stood up too fast," Isabella lied, the words sounding hollow even to her. "I don't belong in a place like that. Those people are... they're actually sick."

"You are sick, honey," Ellie said, a sob breaking through

"Because of the severity of your physical symptoms," Dr. Aris continued, "we've coordinated with a residential facility about an hour from here. It's a specialized hospital for eating disorders. They have the equipment to monitor your heart and the staff to help you through the meals. An ambulance will be here in twenty minutes to transport you."

"An ambulance?" Isabella's eyes widened. "Like I'm an inmate? Mom, please! Don't let them take me there."

"I've already signed the papers, Bella. I'm doing this because I love you too much to let you go."

The monitor's ping was a frantic scream now.

CHAPTER 4

The frantic chirping of the heart monitor reached a fever pitch, a digital scream that filled the small hospital room. To Isabella, the sound was a countdown.

"I'm not going!" she shrieked, the sound tearing at her raw throat.

With a surge of adrenaline that her body couldn't afford, she lunged toward the side of the bed. Her movements were clumsy and frantic. She fumbled with the tape on her hand, her blunt fingernails clawing at the adhesive holding the IV in place.

"Isabella, stop! You'll hurt yourself!" Ellie cried, reaching out to grab her daughter's shoulders.

"Get off me!" Isabella shoved her mother's hands away with a strength born of pure terror. With a sharp tug, the needle slid out of her vein. A dark bloom of blood appeared on the back of her hand, but she didn't feel it. She swung her legs over the railing, her feet hitting the cold floor.

The room didn't just tilt this time; it inverted. Gray spots swarmed her vision like a hive of angry bees. She tried to stand, her intention to bolt for the door, but her legs were like wet paper. She took one staggering step, her hand reaching for the IV pole to steady herself, but the metal stand clattered to the floor with a deafening bang.

Dr. Aris was already at her side, his hands firm on her arms. "Isabella, sit down. You're going to faint again."

"No! Let me go!" She thrashed against him, a bird beating its wings against a glass window. But the burst of energy was fleeting. The "lightness" she had spent months chasing turned into a crushing weight. Her breath came in short, panicked gasps, and the world began to dim at the edges.

"She's grayng out," a nurse said, appearing at the door with a wheelchair.

Isabella felt herself being guided—forced—back into a seat. She tried to fight, but her muscles simply refused to obey. She watched, through tears of rage and exhaustion, as they wrapped a pressure bandage around her bleeding hand.

"The transport team is here," the nurse whispered

The transition was a nightmare of clinical efficiency. Two paramedics entered with a specialized gurney. They didn't listen to her protests; they treated her like a fragile, breaking statue. They strapped her in, the nylon belts clicking over her chest and legs, pinning her to the thin mattress.

"Mom! Mom, don't do this!" Isabella sobbed as they wheeled her into the hallway.

Ellie followed behind, her face a mask of grief, her hands clamped over her mouth to stifle her own cries. She watched as her daughter was loaded into the back of a second ambulance, the doors swinging shut with a heavy, final thud.

The ride was an hour of silence, save for the hum of the engine. When the doors finally opened, Isabella wasn't at a hospital anymore. The building was a converted estate surrounded by a high, discreet fence. The sign read Clearview Recovery Center.

The intake process was a cold immersion into a new reality.

Two female staff members led her into a small, windowless room. "We need to check for any restricted items, Isabella," one said kindly but firmly. They went through her oversized hoodie, her leggings, and even her hair. They confiscated her phone, her hidden fitness tracker, and her sneakers because they had laces. Next she was weighed in a hospital gown, standing backward on the scale so she couldn't see the number. They took her blood pressure sitting, then standing. Her heart rate remained a sluggish, stubborn 42 beats per minute. Lastly she was led down a hallway where the doors had no locks on the inside, and the mirrors were made of polished metal rather than glass.

"This is your room," the staff member said, gesturing to a twin bed with a thin, blue quilt. "Your luggage will be searched and brought to you shortly. Only approved clothing is allowed."

Isabella sat on the edge of the bed. The silence here was different—it wasn't the silence of her bedroom at home, where she felt in control. This was the silence of a vacuum.

A knock at the door startled her. A dietitian entered holding a plastic tray. On it sat a nutritional supplement shake and a small bowl of peaches in heavy syrup.

"I'm not hungry," Isabella whispered, her old defense mechanism kicking in automatically.

The dietitian sat in the chair across from her, her expression steady. "In this unit, Isabella, we don't use hunger as a guide. This is your first prescribed snack. If you can't finish it in the next fifteen minutes, we have to move to the next step of the protocol, which involves the feeding tube."

Isabella looked at the shake, then at the door, then at the camera mounted discreetly in the corner of the ceiling.

For the first time, she realized the "hollow" wall hadn't just crumbled—it had become her prison. The fifteen-minute timer on the wall was a digital heartbeat, ticking down with a cold, red glow. Isabella stared at the nutritional shake. It looked

innocent—a small, chocolate-colored carton—but to her, it felt like a container of liquid lead.

"Ten minutes, Isabella," the dietitian, Sarah, said softly. She didn't look away, and she didn't check her own watch. Her focus was absolute.

"I can't," Isabella whispered. "My stomach... It hurts. I think I'm actually allergic to something in there. Or maybe I just caught a bug from the hospital."

"Your labs don't show an allergy or a virus, Isabella," Sarah replied. "They show a body that is shutting down. The pain you feel is your digestive system trying to remember how to work. The only way through the pain is to give it what it needs."

Isabella picked up the carton. Her hand shook so violently that the straw rattled against the plastic. In her mind, the "Voice"—the cold, demanding part of her brain that had governed her life for months—was screaming.

Don't do it. You'll feel it instantly. You'll feel your skin tighten, your face puff up. You were so close to being light, and now you're going to throw it all away for a drink?

She set the carton back down with a definitive thud. "I'm not drinking it. You can't make me. This is my body."

"You're right, it is your body," Sarah said, her voice remaining level. "And right now, your body is unable to make safe decisions for itself. Because you are medically unstable, we have to intervene. If the timer hits zero, I have to call the nursing staff."

Isabella crossed her arms, tucking her hands into her armpits to hide the tremors. She stared at the wall, focusing on a small scuff mark near the baseboard. She imagined herself turning into stone—hard, unmoving, and incapable of absorbing anything.

The red numbers on the wall hit 00:00.

Sarah stood up. There was no anger in her movement, only a heavy kind of clinical sadness. She stepped to the door and pressed a button on the wall. "Nurse? We have a refusal in Room 4. Please prepare for the nasogastric protocol."

Isabella's bravado vanished, replaced by a cold, primal fear. "Wait, what? No! I'll eat tomorrow. I promise! Just let me sleep tonight and I'll eat a double breakfast."

"We can't negotiate with the disorder, Isabella," a new voice said. A nurse entered, carrying a tray covered in a white cloth. Underneath, Isabella could see the coiled shape of a thin, flexible tube.

"This is a nasogastric (NG) tube," the nurse explained, beginning to put on blue latex gloves. "It goes in through your nose and down into your stomach. It's not a punishment, Isabella. It's a bridge to keep your heart beating until you're strong enough to choose to eat again."

Isabella backed into the corner of her bed, her eyes wide. She looked for her mother, but Ellie was gone—forbidden from being in the room during "feeding therapy" to prevent the patient from using emotional leverage.

"Please," Isabella begged, her voice cracking. "I'll take one sip. Just one."

"The time for the supplement has passed," the nurse said firmly. "We need to ensure you get the full caloric requirement prescribed by Dr. Aris. We're going to do this safely and calmly. I need you to sit up straight and take a sip of water through this straw to help the tube slide down."

As the nurse approached, Isabella realized the terrifying truth of her new life: at Clearview, her "control" was an illusion. The more she fought to stay "light," the more the world would hold her down to keep her alive. The air in the small room curdled with a sudden, sharp electricity. When Isabella saw the nurse reach for the coiled, yellowish tube, the last of her rational mind retreated, replaced by a raw, animalistic survival instinct. To her starved brain, that tube wasn't a life-line; it was an invasion.

"No! Get away from me!" Isabella screamed. As the nurse stepped closer, Isabella didn't just pull away—she exploded.

She scrambled toward the headboard, her heels kicking out blindly. She caught the nurse in the shoulder, sending the tray of medical supplies skittering across the linoleum.

"Isabella, stop! You're going to hurt yourself!" the nurse shouted, signaling toward the open door.

Two more staff members, a male orderly and a second nurse, rushed into the room. They moved with the practiced synchronization of people who had done this a thousand times.

"I won't let you! I'll kill you!" Isabella hissed, her voice a distorted rasp. She lunged for the door, trying to dive past the orderly, but her weakened body was no match for his grip. He caught her around the waist, and for a moment, she was suspended in the air, her legs flailing.

She fought with a terrifying, wiry strength, scratching at his arms and twisting her torso so violently that her spine made a sickening popping sound. She was a blur of oversized hoodie and pale, shaking limbs.

"Code Gray, Room 4," the second nurse said calmly into her radio. "We need assistance for a physical restraint."

Down, gently," the orderly commanded.

They forced her back onto the bed. Isabella thrashed, her head snapping side to side. "Mom! MOM! HELP ME!" she shrieked, her voice echoing down the sterile hallway.

The weight of three adults pressed down on her—one on her legs, two pinning her shoulders and arms. It felt like being buried alive.

"Isabella, listen to my voice," the first nurse said, leaning over her, holding the restraint straps. "We are going to secure your arms so you don't pull the tube out. We are doing this because your heart cannot take another minute of this stress."

"I hate you! I hate all of you!" Isabella sobbed, her face turning a blotchy, frantic red.

The heavy Velcro straps of the physical restraints clicked into place around her wrists, tethering her arms to the metal frame of the bed. Another strap went across her lap. She was pinned flat, her chest heaving, the "ping-ping-ping" of the portable monitor she was hooked to sounding like a frantic alarm.

She was immobile, but she didn't stop fighting. She gritted her teeth, locking her jaw shut.

"Hold her head," the nurse instructed. The orderly placed his hands firmly on either side of Isabella's temples, tilting her chin up.

Isabella felt the cold sensation of the lubricating jelly at the tip of her nostril. Then, the intrusion.

It was a searing, stinging pressure. As the tube pushed past the back of her throat, Isabella gagged, her body convulsing in a violent reflex.

"Swallow, Isabella. Swallow the water," the nurse urged, holding a straw to her lips.

Isabella spat the water out, spraying the nurse's cheek. She tried to cough the tube back up, tears streaming down her face, her nose bleeding slightly from the friction. But the nurse was relentless, sliding the plastic deeper with every choked breath Isabella took until finally, the tube reached her stomach.

The nurse taped the tube to Isabella's cheek with a clear adhesive. The battle was over.

Isabella lay exhausted, the restraints still tight against her skin. She looked broken, her hair matted with sweat and tears, the plastic tube protruding from her nose like a trunk. The "Voice" in her head was silent now, replaced by a crushing sense of defeat.

The nurse adjusted the pump on the pole, and the first "drip" of the high-calorie formula began to click.

"We'll check on you in fifteen minutes," the nurse said, her voice softening as the adrenaline faded. "Rest now, Isabella."

They left the door open a crack. Isabella stared at the ceiling, the rhythmic hum of the feeding pump the only sound in the room. She was no longer "light as air." She felt like lead, anchored to the earth by the very things she had spent months trying to escape. The rhythmic click-hiss of the feeding pump was a countdown Isabella couldn't endure. Each drop of formula felt like a betrayal, a heavy stone added to the foundation of a body she no longer recognized.

The staff had underestimated the desperation of a mind that believes its survival depends on its disappearance.

Isabella waited until the footsteps in the hallway faded. Her wrists were raw from straining against the Velcro, but the fabric was meant to be "safe," not unbreakable. Using the jagged edge of her own fingernails, she picked and frayed at the stitching of the right restraint, her movements frantic and rhythmic. With a desperate, bone-snapping wrench of her thumb, she slipped her hand through the loop.

She didn't hesitate. She reached up and grabbed the plastic tubing taped to her cheek.

There was no grace in it. She yanked.

The sensation was horrific—a long, burning friction that felt like a wire being pulled through her sinuses. She gagged, the tube lashing out of her nose like a dying snake, splattering the blue quilt with bile and formula. The alarm on the pump began a high-pitched, continuous scream: OCCLUSION. ERROR.

She didn't stop there. Fueled by a surge of adrenaline her body couldn't afford, she scrambled off the bed, dragging the IV pole with her until it crashed into the wall. She was trying to find the door, trying to find an exit that didn't exist.

The door burst open. It wasn't just Sarah this time; it was a team of four.

"Isabella! Get back!"

"Stay away!" she shrieked, swinging the metal IV pole like a rusted scythe. The tube trailed from her hand, a blood-flecked trophy of her rebellion. "I won't let you put it back in! I'll die first!"

The struggle was shorter this time because her heart couldn't sustain the output. Her vision tunneled into black spots. As the orderly disarmed her and pinned her to the floor, she felt a sharp prick in her thigh—a sedative to stop the spiraling tachycardia that threatened to stop her heart.

When Isabella woke, the world was different. The "estate" feel of Clearview had vanished.

She was in the Specialized Care Suite, also known as the "Quiet Room." There was no twin bed with a quilt, only a heavy,

seamless mattress bolted to the floor in the center of the room. The walls were padded with high-impact foam, and the light was a recessed, dim amber glow that she couldn't turn off.

She wasn't wearing her hoodie anymore. She was in "safety scrubs"—heavy, tear-resistant fabric with no zippers, buttons, or strings.

A voice crackled over a small intercom. It was Dr. Aris.

"Isabella, because you have interfered with life-saving medical equipment and engaged in self-harm, we have placed you on a 48-hour involuntary psychiatric hold. You are currently a danger to yourself. You will remain in the secure unit under 1-to-1 observation."

Isabella looked at the corner of the room. A staff member sat in a chair just behind a plexiglass partition, a clipboard in hand, noting every breath she took.

She reached for her face, but her hands were encased in "mitts"—soft, bulky restraints that looked like boxing gloves, preventing her from gripping a tube or scratching her skin.

There was no clock on the wall. No red digital heartbeat. There was only the realization that her war with her body had reached a stalemate. In the silence of the secure room, she couldn't even pace to burn calories; the floor was too soft, her body too heavy from the sedative.

She lay on the floor mattress, staring at the ceiling. The 48 hours stretched out before her like a desert. For the first time, the "Voice" was quiet, not because it was gone, but because even it was terrified of the void Isabella had finally entered.

The 48 hours in the "Quiet Room" had been a blur of fluorescent dimness and the steady, scratching sound of a pen on a clipboard. When the door finally stayed open—not just for a tray or a vitals check, but for a transition—Isabella felt a strange, hollow relief.

The mitts were removed, leaving her hands feeling light and dangerously bare. Her "safety scrubs" were exchanged for a set of approved, stringless sweatpants.

"The hold is lifted, Isabella," Dr. Aris said, standing by the nurse's station as she was led out. "Your heart rate has stabilized at 48, and you've tolerated the continuous NG drip for the last twenty-four hours. You're moving to the Residential Wing. But understand—this is a privilege. If the tube is touched again, you return to the secure unit immediately."

Isabella didn't look at him. She followed the nurse down a different corridor, her sneakers—still laceless—shuffling against the carpet.

They stopped at Room 12. Unlike the clinical isolation of the secure unit, this room felt like a dorm, though the "safety" features were still there if you knew where to look. The windows were made of unbreakable Lexan; the wardrobe had no bars to hang things on.

"This is your space," the nurse said, gesturing to the left side of the room. "Your luggage has been cleared. You have thirty minutes to unpack before the afternoon processing group."

Isabella stepped inside. On the right side of the room, a girl was sitting cross-legged on her bed, a sketchbook propped against her knees. She looked a few years older than Isabella, with short, choppy dyed-blue hair and eyes that looked like they had seen every trick in the book.

The girl didn't look up immediately. She finished a stroke of her pencil, blew a stray graphite flake off the page, and then turned her head.

"You're the one who pulled the 'Houdini' with the NG tube, right?" she asked. Her voice wasn't judgmental—it was tired, edged with a dark sort of humor. "The whole wing heard the Code Gray. I'm Maya."

Isabella froze, her hand clutching the strap of her duffel bag. "I... I'm Isabella."

Maya hopped off the bed. She was wearing a baggy t-shirt that couldn't quite hide the fact that she, too, had a thin clear tube taped to her cheek, snaking behind her ear.

"Welcome to the fishbowl, Isabella," Maya said, walking over to a small bookshelf. "Rule number one: don't try to hide your weights in your pockets during morning check-in. They do a pat-down now because of a girl last month. Rule number two: if you hate the chocolate supplement, ask for the vanilla and mix it with the decaf coffee. It's the only way to make it taste like actual food."

Isabella looked at her own bed—the thin blue quilt was back, but there was a new piece of equipment beside it: a portable feeding pump on a rolling stand. It was her new shadow.

"I don't belong here," Isabella whispered, the words feeling like a prayer.

Maya laughed, a short, dry sound. "None of us think we do. We all think we're the exception. But look around, Izzy." She pointed to the polished metal mirror on the wall. "The 'Voice' lied to you. It told you that if you kept going, you'd be free."

Does this look like freedom?"

Isabella looked at the metal mirror. For the first time in days, she saw herself. Not the "light" version she imagined, but a girl with sunken, bruised-looking eyes, a plastic tube in her nose, and skin the color of parchment.

"It's quiet in here," Isabella noted, her voice trembling.

"It is," Maya agreed, climbing back onto her bed. "But at least here, you don't have to pretend you're not drowning. We're all under high-tide here." The transition from the isolation of the secure unit to the "Processing Group" was a jarring shift from silence to a low, heavy hum of collective struggle.

The group met in a circular room with large windows that looked out onto a manicured garden—a view meant to be "inspiring" that felt, to Isabella, like a cruel taunt. Eight girls sat in a circle of mismatched armchairs.

Isabella took a seat next to Maya, keeping her head down, her hands tucked into the sleeves of her oversized sweater. The feeding pump she had to bring with her sat beside her chair, its occasional whirr felt like it was announcing her presence to the room.

The therapist, a man named Leo with a calm, unshakeable demeanor, waited until the clock struck 2:00 PM.

"Welcome back, everyone. And welcome, Isabella," Leo said, his eyes kind but observant. "In this group, we don't talk about numbers, weights, or specific 'tips.' We talk about the 'Voice'—how it manipulated you today and what you're doing to push back."

The room went quiet. Isabella felt the heat rise in her neck. She could feel the other girls looking at the tape on her cheek.

"I'll start," Maya said, breaking the tension. She leaned back, her blue hair messy. "The Voice told me this morning that if I finished my oatmeal, I was 'giving up.' It told me I was becoming 'undisciplined.' I told it to shut up, but I still left two spoonfuls. I'm still stuck in the middle."

Leo nodded. "Thank you, Maya. Compromise is often the first step, even if it feels like a loss. Isabella? You've had a very difficult forty-eight hours. What is the Voice saying to you right now?"

Isabella swallowed hard. The tube in her throat made the movement feel thick and awkward. "It's... it's not saying anything," she lied, her voice barely a whisper.

"Really?" Leo tilted his head. "Because usually, after a restraint and a 1-to-1 hold, the Voice is screaming. It usually tells patients they've 'failed' or that they're being 'punished.'"

"It says I'm a monster," Isabella blurted out, her eyes suddenly stinging with tears. "It says I'm a violent, disgusting monster for what I did to the nurses. And it says that because I have this..." she gestured to the feeding tube, "I've already lost. That there's no point in trying anymore because you're just going to force-feed me into someone I don't recognize."

A girl across the circle, who had been picking at a loose thread on her jeans, looked up. Her name was Sophie, and she looked even more fragile than Isabella.

"It's not force-feeding," Sophie said, her voice surprisingly steady. "It's a transfusion. Like if you were a car with no gas. They aren't changing who you are, Isabella. They're just trying to keep the lights on so we can actually see who you are."

"I don't even know who I am without it," Isabella whispered.

"That's why we're here," Leo intervened. "The disorder is a parasite. It takes up so much room in your brain that 'Isabella' has been pushed into a tiny corner. The pain you're feeling—the anger at the tube, the shame of the hold—that's the parasite fighting for its life. Not you." As the group ended, the girls stood up, the collective clack of several portable pumps creating a strange, rhythmic symphony.

Maya bumped her shoulder against Isabella's as they walked toward the door. "First one is always the worst," she muttered. "You survived it. That's more than some people do on their first day back from the 'Quiet Room.'"

CHAPTER 5

Isabella looked at the garden through the glass. For a split second, she didn't see a prison; she saw a place she might one day walk through without feeling like she was made of glass. The realization didn't hit Isabella like a lightning bolt; it arrived more like a slow, steady tide, pulling away the silt until the bedrock was finally visible. It happened during the "Free Reflection" hour, a mandated period of quiet where they were allowed to sit in the lounge. Isabella was curled into a beanbag chair, the hum of her feeding pump a dull, mechanical companion. Across the room, Sophie—the girl who had called the feeding tube a "transfusion"—was bathed in the golden afternoon light streaming through the Lexan windows. Sophie was leaning over a book, her brow furrowed in concentration. She had tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, revealing the sharp, delicate line of her jaw. Isabella found herself staring. It wasn't the clinical stare she usually gave other girls—the kind where she compared wrist sizes or the hollows of collarbones.

This was different. It was a magnetic pull, a warmth that started in her chest and radiated outward, making the "Voice" in her head go strangely, blissfully silent.

As she watched Sophie, Isabella felt a sudden, sharp disconnect from the word girl. For years, she had fought a war with her body, trying to shrink it, to erase the curves, to make it disappear. She had always thought she was trying to be a "thinner girl." But in the quiet of Clearview, stripped of her oversized hoodies and the armor of her disorder, the truth felt more profound.

She didn't want to be a thinner girl. She didn't feel like a girl at all. But the thought of being a "boy" felt equally distant, like a costume that wouldn't fit.

"You're staring again," Maya whispered, dropping into the chair next to her. She didn't say it meanly; there was a knowing glimmer in her eyes.

Isabella felt her face flush—a genuine, hot blood-rush that felt more alive than anything she'd experienced in months. "I... I wasn't. I was just thinking."

"About Sophie? Or about the fact that she's pretty?" Maya asked, flipping through a magazine.

Isabella opened her mouth to reflexively deny it, but the lie died in her throat. The "Quiet Room" had broken her ability to perform. "I don't think I've ever felt like... like the other girls," she said, her voice trembling. "Not just because of the food. But because of being a girl. It feels like a role I'm failing at."

Maya slowed her page-turning. "A lot of us use the disorder to stop time. To stop our bodies from changing into things we aren't ready for. Or things we aren't."

"I don't feel like a boy," Isabella clarified quickly, her hands twisting in her lap. "I just feel like... me. Just a person. Without the labels."

The word non-binary floated into her mind, a term she'd seen online but never dared to claim. It felt like a wide-open field compared to the narrow, suffocating hallway she had been living in.

She looked back at Sophie. The attraction was there—sharp, sweet, and terrifyingly real. It was a hunger that had nothing to do with calories and everything to do with connection. For the first time, Isabella realized that the "Voice" had been a shield. It had kept her so focused on her weight that she never had to face the fact that she was a person who could love, and be loved, in a way that didn't fit the "perfect daughter" mold her mother had built for her.

"I think I like her," Isabella whispered, the admission feeling like a tiny crack in a dam. "And I think... I think I'm not who everyone thinks I am."

Maya smiled, a real one this time. "Welcome to the real work, Izzy. The tube fixes the heart rate. This part? This is the part that actually saves your life."

Isabella took a shaky breath. Her body still felt like lead, and the tube still stung her throat, but the "hollow" wall didn't feel like a prison anymore. It felt like a space she could finally start to fill. Isabella—now they—sat a little straighter in the green chair. The shift in pronouns had opened a door, and through that door, they could see the remnants of their old life falling away like dead leaves. "Dr. Aris?" they said, their voice steadier than it had been since the intake. "I don't think I can be 'Isabella' anymore. That name... it belongs to the girl who was disappearing. It belongs to my mother's expectations. I want something else. I just don't know what. Dr. Aris set his legal pad aside and leaned back, giving the request the gravity it deserved. "Names are powerful, especially in recovery. They can act as an anchor for the person you are becoming. Would you like to brainstorm some options? We can look for something gender-neutral, perhaps something rooted in nature or something that feels 'grounded.'"

Isabella—the person in the chair—nodded. "Something that doesn't feel like it has a weight attached to it."

Dr. Aris tapped his pen thoughtfully against his chin. "Let's try a few on for size. Just listen to how they sound in the room."

"How about River? It's constant, but always moving. It suggests a flow rather than a fixed state."

"Or Rowan? It's a strong, resilient tree. It has deep roots, which is something we're working on for you."

"There's also Kai. It's short, sharp, and means 'sea' in many cultures. It's vast."

The person in the chair shook their head. "Those feel... too loud. I want something that feels like the silence after the storm. Something calm."

Dr. Aris nodded, flipping a page on his pad. "What about Sage?" The word hung in the air, soft and earthy.

"Sage," they repeated. It felt cool in their mouth, unlike the scratchy, invasive feeling of the tube. It reminded them of the herb—resilient, healing, and silver-green. It didn't sound like a "daughter" or a "pretty girl." It sounded like someone who had survived a fire and come back stronger.

"Sage," they said again, more firmly this time. A small, genuine smile touched the corners of their mouth, even with the tape pulling at their skin. "I'm Sage."

"It suits you," Dr. Aris said, his own expression softening. He picked up his pen and drew a clean line through the name at the top of the chart, writing SAGE in bold, block letters underneath.

"Alright, Sage. Let's talk about the next forty-eight hours. Now that we know who we're nourishing, how do we make this afternoon's snack feel less like a battle and more like an investment in Sage's future?"

Sage looked down at their hands. For the first time, they didn't see "Isabella's" shaking fingers. They saw their own hands—the hands of a person who was finally, slowly, beginning to take up space in the world.

"I think," Sage said, "that Sage might be able to handle the vanilla shake. If I can drink it in the lounge. Near the window."

"I'll make it happen," Dr. Aris promised. The afternoon sun hit the lounge floor in long, slanted rectangles. Sage sat by the window, the vanilla nutritional shake sitting on a small side table. It was the same brand, the same carton that had triggered the "Code Gray" days before, but the context had shifted. Sage picked up the carton. Their hand still shook, but the "Voice" was muffled, like a radio playing in another room. I'm not feeding the monster, Sage thought, repeating a mantra Dr. Aris had suggested. I'm feeding Sage.

They took a sip. The cold, thick liquid was difficult to swallow, and the familiar panic flared in their chest—a phantom feeling of their skin "tightening." But they looked at the trees outside, focusing on the word Sage. They finished half the carton, then the rest, setting the empty container down with a trembling hand.

"Done," Sage whispered to the monitoring nurse, who gave a small, encouraging nod and noted it on a clipboard. No tube, no struggle. Just a quiet, hard-won victory.

When Sage returned to the room, the adrenaline had faded, leaving behind a bone-deep exhaustion. Maya was on her bed, headphones around her neck.

"You look like you went ten rounds with a ghost," Maya said, watching Sage collapse onto the twin bed.

"I finished the snack," Sage said into the pillow. Then, they rolled over to face Maya. "And I talked to Aris. I'm not Isabella anymore. My name is Sage. And my pronouns are they/them."

Maya went still for a second, then a slow, lopsided grin spread across her face. "Sage. Like the plant? Or like a wise person?"

"Both, I think," Sage said, feeling a flush of heat. "It just... it fits. Being a 'girl' felt like I was wearing a mask that was too small."

"I get it," Maya said softly, her voice losing its usual bite. "A lot of us here are trying to kill off parts of ourselves we hate. It's a lot harder to actually name the part you want to keep. Welcome to the world, Sage." The morning routine at Clearview was a blur of vitals, weigh-ins, and "breakfast support," but Sage felt a strange new electricity under their skin. After the meal, during the transition to the morning reflection group, Sage saw Sophie by the water station.

Sophie looked up, her pale eyes curious. "Hey. You survived the first night back in the main wing."

Sage took a breath. This was the part that felt more dangerous than the feeding tube—being seen by someone they actually liked. "Yeah. But I'm... I'm going by Sage now. And I use they/them pronouns."

Sophie paused, her hand on the lever of the water cooler. She looked Sage up and down, not with the clinical gaze of a doctor, but with a soft, lingering interest that made Sage's heart skip a beat—this time for a healthy reason.

"Sage," Sophie repeated. She smiled, and for the first time, it reached her eyes. "It's a beautiful name. It feels much more... 'you' than the other one. I'm glad you're here, Sage."

As they walked toward the group room together, their shoulders brushed. For the first time in months, Sage didn't try to shrink away from the contact. They stayed right where they were.

CHAPTER 6

The visit took place in the "Family Room," a space designed to feel cozy with its overstuffed couches and bowls of plastic fruit, but the air was thick with the clinical tension of Clearview. A staff member sat in the corner, a silent observer with a notepad, ensuring the conversation stayed "recovery-focused."

Ellie was already there, clutching her designer handbag so tightly her knuckles were white. When Sage walked in—still wearing the baggy sweatpants, the feeding tube still taped to their cheek, and a new, quiet stillness in their eyes—Ellie stood up instantly.

"Isabella!" Ellie rushed forward, her eyes brimming with tears. "Oh, thank God. They told me you were out of the... the special unit. You look so tired, baby."

Sage took a half-step back, not out of malice, but because the name felt like an old, itchy sweater that didn't fit anymore. They sat on the chair opposite the sofa, keeping the coffee table as a barrier.

"Mom," Sage started, their voice low. "We need to talk about something. It's important for my treatment. I'm not using that name anymore."

Ellie froze, her hand halfway to her mouth. "What do you mean? It's your grandmother's name. It's a beautiful name."

"It's not my name," Sage said, looking Ellie directly in the eye. "The doctors and I... we've been talking. A lot of the reason I was hurting myself was because I was trying to fit into a shape that wasn't mine. I'm not a girl, Mom. I'm non-binary. And my name is Sage."

The silence that followed was heavy. Ellie looked at the staff member in the corner as if expecting them to jump in and "fix" this new symptom. When the staff member remained silent, Ellie turned back to Sage, her face twisting into a mask of pity.

"Isabella, honey, you're just confused because you're malnourished," Ellie whispered, her voice trembling. "Your brain isn't getting enough fats. Once you get your weight back up, you'll feel like yourself again. You'll see. We can go shopping for those dresses you liked—"

"I never liked them!" Sage's voice cracked, sharp and sudden. "I wore them because you looked at me like I was a broken toy if I didn't. This isn't the 'disorder' talking, Mom. This is the first time the disorder has been quiet enough for me to actually hear myself."

Ellie reached across the table, trying to grab Sage's hand, but Sage pulled back.

"If you want to visit me," Sage said, "you have to use my name. And you have to use they and them. If you can't do that, the doctors say it's not 'therapeutic' for you to be here."

Ellie looked like she had been slapped. She looked at the tube in Sage's nose, then at the short, messy hair, and finally at the person who looked like her daughter but spoke like a stranger.

"I don't understand this," Ellie sobbed, dabbing at her eyes with a silk handkerchief. "I just wanted my little girl back."

"You never had a little girl, Mom," Sage said, their heart aching but their resolve hardening. "You had me. And if you want me to stay alive, you have to meet me where I am. Not where you want me to be."

The staff member cleared their throat. "Ten minutes left, Ellie. Let's try to focus on how we can support Sage's new identity in the home environment."

Ellie didn't say the name "Sage" for the rest of the visit. She couldn't bring herself to do it. But as she left, she looked back at them—really looked at them—and for a split second, she didn't see a patient. She saw a person who had fought a war and was finally standing their ground. The following week at Clearview felt like the slow turning of a season. The "vacuum" silence Sage had first encountered was now filled with the hum of communal life, the scratch of colored pencils in sketchbooks, and the steady, difficult work of reclaiming a body. The morning was crisp when Sage was called into the medical exam room. Dr. Aris wasn't there; instead, it was the same nurse who had inserted the tube a week prior.

"Your labs are consistent, Sage," the nurse said, her voice warm. "Your heart rate is holding steady at 56 beats per minute, even without the continuous drip. Dr. Aris has cleared us to transition you to 100% oral intake."

Sage sat on the edge of the table. The removal was a strange, sliding sensation—a long, cold ghost leaving their body. When it was out, Sage instinctively reached up to touch their cheek. The skin was red and irritated from the adhesive, but for the first time in what felt like an eternity, there was nothing blocking their airway, nothing tethering them to a machine.

Sage looked in the polished metal mirror. Without the plastic tube, their face looked more "theirs." The sharp angles of their jaw were still there, but the haunted look in their eyes had begun to recede.

Later that afternoon, Sage was granted "Level 2" privileges, which meant thirty minutes of supervised time in the actual garden, not just looking through the Lexan.

They sat on a stone bench under a sprawling oak tree. The air smelled of damp earth and cedar. A shadow fell over them, and Sage looked up to see Sophie. She was wearing a thick flannel shirt that made her look soft and approachable.

"You look... lighter," Sophie said, taking a seat on the opposite end of the bench. She noticed the lack of the tube immediately. "They took it out?"

"Yeah," Sage said, breathing in the cold air. "It feels weird. Like I'm missing a limb or something. But a limb I hated."

Sophie leaned back, looking up at the branches. "I remember when mine came out. I felt like I was floating. But then the fear sets in, right? Because now it's all on you. No safety net."

"It is on me," Sage agreed. "But I think... I think I'm actually hungry for the first time. Not for the shakes. For, like, real life."

Sophie turned her head, her gaze lingering on Sage. "Maya told me about your mom's visit. She said it was pretty rough."

Sage sighed, kicking a loose pebble with their sneaker. "She didn't use my name once. She keeps waiting for 'Isabella' to wake up from a nap. I don't think she realizes that girl is gone."

"Maybe she'll learn," Sophie said softly. She reached out, her hand resting on the stone bench between them. "But even if she doesn't, you're not alone in here. I know who Sage is. And I think Sage is pretty incredible for standing up to her."

Sage felt that same warmth from the lounge returning, a steady pulse of connection that made the "Voice" feel like a distant, fading echo. They took a risk and slid their hand across the stone, their pinky finger just barely brushing against Sophie's.

Sophie didn't pull away. She moved her hand closer, her fingers lacing through Sage's.

"You're not a monster, Sage," Sophie whispered, echoing the words Sage had said in the group session. "You're just a person trying to find home in your own skin."

In the quiet of the garden, with the sun on their face and their name finally belonging to them, Sage realized they weren't just surviving anymore. They were beginning to exist.

The following weeks were a blurred montage of stolen moments. In the high-walled world of Clearview, where every calorie was measured and every minute accounted for, Sage and Sophie's connection became the only thing that felt unscripted.

They spent their "Free Reflection" hours in the back corner of the library, tucked behind stacks of dusty encyclopedias. They shared music through a single pair of headphones, Sage's hand always finding Sophie's. Their first kiss happened there—a soft, hesitant press of lips that tasted like peppermint tea and felt like a promise that a life worth living existed outside the hospital walls.

But recovery is not a straight line, and for Sophie, the damage to her heart had been more profound than anyone realized. It happened during a Tuesday afternoon group. Sophie had been quieter than usual, her skin a translucent, waxy grey. Mid-sentence, while Leo was discussing "body neutrality," Sophie's head lulled back. Her sketchbook slid from her lap, the charcoal pencils clattering across the floor.

"Sophie?" Sage whispered, reaching out.

Then the alarms started. The "Code Blue" announcement echoed through the halls, a jagged contrast to the "Code Gray" Sage had once triggered. Nurses swarmed the room, a crash cart was wheeled in, and Sage was pushed back, screaming her name, until Maya dragged them into the hallway.

Two hours later, Dr. Aris walked into the lounge. He didn't have his legal pad. He looked older, his shoulders slumped. He didn't have to say the words. The silence in the wing changed; it wasn't the silence of a vacuum anymore. It was the silence of a grave.

The grief was a physical weight, heavier than any meal Sage had ever been forced to eat. In the days following Sophie's death, Sage became a ghost. They stopped speaking in group. They stopped looking at the garden. Every time they closed their eyes, they saw the empty chair in the library and the unfinished sketch of a tree Sophie had left on her nightstand.

The "Voice" returned, not as a whisper, but as a roar of thunder.

See? it hissed. You tried to be full. You tried to love. And look what happened. If you were light, you wouldn't feel this heavy. If you were empty, there would be no room for this pain.

The descent was swift and clinical. It started with the "water trick"—drinking massive amounts of water before morning weigh-ins to trick the scale. Then came the "pocketing"—hiding bits of high-protein chicken in the hem of their oversized hoodie during dinner.

One night, Maya found Sage in the bathroom, staring at the polished metal mirror, their fingers digging into their ribs, searching for the bones that had begun to hide under a layer of recovery.

"Sage, don't," Maya whispered, standing in the doorway. "She wouldn't want this for you."

"She's gone, Maya!" Sage spun around, their eyes red and hollow. "The only thing I have left that I can control is how much of me is left in this world. I don't want to be Sage. Sage feels too much. I want to go back to being nothing."

The next morning, Sage's vitals told the truth.

Heart Rate: 40 bpm.

Weight: Down four pounds in three days.

Labs: Potassium critically low.

Sage sat on the edge of the bed, the "Isabella" hoodie pulled tight around them. The door opened, and Dr. Aris walked in. He wasn't carrying a clipboard; he was carrying the yellow, coiled nasogastric tube.

"I'm sorry, Sage," he said softly. "But we can't let you follow her."

Sage didn't fight this time. They didn't scream or kick. They just stared at the empty bed across the room where Sophie used to sit, and as the cold tube slid back down their throat, they welcomed the stinging pain. It was the only thing that felt as sharp as their grief. The descent was silent and absolute. In the Secure Unit, Sage didn't fight the staff; they simply ceased to occupy the space. They were a shadow pinned to a mattress, eyes fixed on the padded ceiling, refusing to speak or acknowledge the world that had stolen Sophie.

Because Sage was now a "repeat eloper" from medical compliance, the restrictions were tighter than ever. No books, no music, no Maya. The 1-to-1 observer sat behind the glass, a constant, silent witness to Sage's disintegration.

On the third night of the hold, a nurse brought in a small, sealed plastic bag. "This was in the bedside locker in your old room," she said quietly. "It was tucked behind the drawer. The staff thought you should have it."

Inside was a single sheet of paper, folded into a tiny, precise square.

Sage waited until the nurse left. With trembling fingers—fingers that looked like pale twigs—they unfolded it. It was a sketch Sophie must have finished in the hours before her heart stopped. It wasn't a tree or a landscape.

It was a portrait of Sage.

In the drawing, Sage wasn't a patient. They weren't wearing a hospital gown or a tube. They were standing in a field of tall grass, their hair windblown, their expression fierce and undeniably alive. On the back, in Sophie's cramped, artistic handwriting, were five words:

"Don't let them erase you."

Sage stared at the drawing until the lines blurred. The "Voice" tried to scream that it was a lie, that Sophie was gone and Sage should follow, but the drawing was a physical tether. It was proof that Sage existed outside of a chart.

The realization came too late for Sage's physical heart. The stress of the grief, the rapid weight loss, and the refusal to cooperate had pushed their body over a cliff. That night, the monitor didn't just beep—it flatlined.

"Code Blue! Secure Unit, Room 1!"

The quiet of the unit was shattered. Sage felt a strange, cold floating sensation as the world turned into a chaotic blur of blue scrubs and chest compressions. They were rushed to the ambulance, the familiar gates of Clearview disappearing as they were transported to the local hospital's Intensive Care Unit (ICU).

In the ICU, Sage was no longer a "recovery patient." They were a medical emergency. They were hooked to a ventilator, a central line in their neck, and a cooling blanket to protect their brain. For forty-eight hours, Sage hovered in the grey space between being and not being.

CHAPTER 7

When Sage finally opened their eyes in the sterile, white light of the ICU, they couldn't move. They felt the heavy thud of a machine-assisted heartbeat in their chest. Their mother was in the corner, sobbing into her hands, still calling out for "Isabella."

Sage looked at the ceiling. They thought of the drawing, now tucked into a safe at Clearview. They thought of the name "Sage" and how Sophie had said it like it was a holy word.

I can't give up, Sage thought, the realization burning through the fog of sedation. If I die now, I die as Isabella. I die as a tragedy. I die as the girl who disappeared.

The "Voice" was still there, but it sounded small now, pathetic compared to the roar of the ventilator.

Sage's hand twitched on the sterile sheet. They couldn't speak through the tube in their throat, but they looked at the nurse checking their vitals. They didn't look away. They didn't hide.

I have to prove I'm real, Sage vowed. I have to be the person Sophie saw in that drawing. Not for my mother, not for the doctors. For Sage.

The road back was no longer about "getting better" to please the world. It was a revolution. Sage was going to take their body back, not to destroy it, but to use it as a vessel for the person Sophie knew they could be. The return to Clearview was different. There were no screams this time, no frantic kicking. When the transport van pulled up to the gate, Sage stepped out with a hollow but steady gaze. They were thinner than before the ICU—frail enough that the wind seemed to catch in their oversized clothes—but the "Voice" was no longer the commander. It was just a ghost in the attic.

Sage was placed back in the Residential Wing, but under a "Medical Watch" protocol. They were no longer allowed to be alone, but they didn't want to be. They spent their days in the library, sitting in the exact chair where Sophie used to sit, holding the sketch of themselves like a shield.

Two weeks into their return, Sage was called to a private meeting. Instead of Dr. Aris, a woman named Elena sat there. She was a clinical social worker with a sharp, observant gaze and a folder thick with years of reports.

"Sage," she began, using their name without hesitation. "I've been reviewing your case—not just the medical files from the last month, but the history of your home environment. The reports from the ICU, the statements from the staff here during your mother's visits, and the notes on her refusal to acknowledge your identity." Sage felt a tremor in their hands. They waited for the lecture about "family reunification."

"We've determined that returning to your mother's home is a direct threat to your medical and psychological stability," Elena said firmly. "Your mother's inability to support your identity is considered a form of emotional neglect that fuels your self-harming behaviors. The state has granted a protective order. You are being removed from Ellie's care."

Sage felt a dizzying mix of terror and absolute, weightless freedom. For the first time in their life, the "perfect daughter" role was officially cancelled.

"Once you are medically stable enough to leave Clearview," Elena continued, "you won't be going back to that house. We've secured a spot for you at The Trevor House. It's a specialized group home for LGBTQ+ youth in recovery. Most of the residents are non-binary or trans. The staff is trained in both gender-affirming care and eating disorder recovery."

Sage looked at the brochure Elena pushed across the table. It wasn't a hospital. There were photos of a communal kitchen where residents cooked together, a garden that wasn't fenced in by Lexan, and rooms that looked like actual bedrooms.

"I don't have to be 'Isabella' there?" Sage whispered.

"In that house, Isabella doesn't exist," Elena said. "Only Sage. You'll have a therapist who specializes in gender identity, and you'll be with peers who understand exactly why you felt you had to disappear."

Sage looked at the sketch Sophie had drawn. They realized that this was what Sophie meant. Don't let them erase you. By leaving Ellie, Sage was finally stopping the erasure.

"What about my things?" Sage asked.

"We will arrange for a neutral party to collect your essentials," Elena said. "You never have to step foot in that house again if you don't want to."

That night, for the first time since the ICU, Sage ate their entire dinner without a single prompt from the nurse. They weren't eating for the doctors, and they weren't eating to please a mother who didn't see them. They were eating because they finally had a future worth being present for. The final month at Clearview was no longer a battle for survival; it was a slow, deliberate construction of a person. Sage spent the days in a "step-down" phase. The feeding tube was long gone, replaced by a meal plan that Sage followed with a quiet, grim determination. They were no longer eating to be "good"—they were eating to be strong enough to walk out the front gates and never look back.

Sage spent hours in the library, but they no longer sat in Sophie's chair to mourn. They sat there to study. With the help of the social worker, they began looking into the legal process for a name change and researched the history of non-binary identities.

They also began "Exposure Therapy." This involved wearing clothes that felt right—not just oversized hoodies to hide, but button-down shirts and vests from the donation bin that felt more masculine-leaning or neutral.

Maya remained their anchor. They sat together during evening checks, Maya's blue hair now faded to a dusty teal. "You're going to kill it at Trevor House," Maya said one night, tossing a stress ball against the wall. "No more 'Isabella' ghosts. Just Sage." "I'm scared," Sage admitted, looking at their hands. They were no longer skeletal; they looked like hands that could hold a pen, a book, or a future. "What if I get there and I'm still... this?" "You'll be 'this' in a place that actually likes 'this,'" Maya replied. "That's the difference."

On the last morning, Sage packed their single duffel bag. They left behind the hospital-issued gowns and the laceless sneakers. They kept Sophie's sketch, wrapped carefully in a plastic sleeve, tucked against the heart-side of their bag.

Dr. Aris met them at the entrance. "You've done the hardest work a human can do, Sage. You chose to stay when everything told you to leave. Don't forget that strength."

Sage shook his hand. It was the first time they felt like his equal—two people standing on the same ground.

The transport car wasn't a medical van; it was a regular SUV. As Sage walked out the front doors, the air hit them differently. It didn't smell like antiseptic or floor wax. It smelled like winter pine and wet pavement.

They didn't look back at the high, discreet fence of Clearview. They looked forward at the road.

The drive to the city took two hours. When the car pulled up to a brick Victorian house with a rainbow flag hanging discreetly near the doorbell, Sage's heart did a strange, fluttery dance. This wasn't a facility. It was a home.

A person with a shaved head and a bright smile stepped out onto the porch. "You must be Sage! I'm Alex, one of the house managers. Welcome home."

Sage stepped onto the sidewalk, their duffel bag slung over their shoulder. For the first time in their life, they weren't Isabella, the girl who was disappearing. They weren't a patient, a "Code Gray," or a tragedy.

They were Sage. They were present. And for the first time, they were finally, truly, taking up space.

CHAPTER 8

A week at The Trevor House had done more for Sage's spirit than months at Clearview ever could. There were no locks on the outside of the doors here, and the mirrors were real glass—reflecting a person who was slowly beginning to inhabit their own skin.

Sage was sitting in the communal living room, curled into a window seat with a book on botany, when the front door opened. Alex, the house manager, stepped in, followed by a girl carrying two overstuffed suitcases and a guitar case plastered with stickers.

"Everyone, this is Chloe," Alex announced with a warm grin. "She's joining us in the East Wing."

Sage looked up, and the world seemed to tilt on its axis.

Chloe was tall, with a graceful, slightly awkward elegance that reminded Sage of a young willow tree. She had long, dark curls that cascaded over the shoulders of a vintage denim jacket, and her eyes—a deep, observant amber—were rimmed with a nervous but defiant shimmer. She was a trans girl, still in the early, tender stages of her transition, and there was a raw, beautiful honesty in the way she carried herself.

She caught Sage's gaze and offered a small, shy smile. In that moment, the "Voice" that had haunted Sage for years didn't just go quiet—it vanished. Replacing it was a sudden, sharp clarity. It was the same magnetic pull Sage had felt with Sophie, but this felt different. It didn't feel like a shared tragedy; it felt like a shared beginning.

"Hi," Chloe said, her voice a soft, melodic alto. She set her guitar case down and pushed a stray curl behind her ear. "I'm Chloe. I use she/her."

Sage stood up, their book forgotten on the window seat. For the first time, they didn't feel the urge to hide their frame or check the visible lines of their collarbone. They felt... solid.

"I'm Sage," they said, and they were surprised by how steady their own voice sounded. "They/them. I, uh... I like your stickers. The one of the ghost holding a pride flag is cool."

Chloe's face lit up, a genuine, radiant beam that made Sage's breath hitch. "Thanks! I got that at a zine fest back home. It's kind of my mascot."

A few months at Trevor House had transformed Sage. The sharp, skeletal edges of their body had softened into a silhouette that felt like a home rather than a cage. They were no longer "the patient"; they were a person who painted, who gardened, and who had found a profound, grounding love in Chloe.

Their relationship was a sanctuary of shared truths. They had navigated the complexities of their bodies together, moving with a gentleness that only two people who had survived a war with their own skin could understand. One rainy Tuesday, the boundaries of that sanctuary had shifted into something deeper, more permanent.

It was a Tuesday morning, three months after Chloe's arrival. Sage sat on the edge of the clawfoot tub in the shared bathroom, staring at a small plastic stick. The "Voice" that used to scream about calories was gone, but a new, terrifying silence had taken its place.

Two pink lines.

Sage's hand went to their stomach—a place they had spent years trying to flatten, to hollow out, to erase. Now, it was the site of a life they hadn't planned for. Because of their history with the eating disorder and the way it had affected their cycle, Sage had assumed this was impossible.

A cold wave of the old panic surged. I can't do this, the old thoughts whispered. My body will change. I'll lose control. I'll become the "mother" I just escaped.

But then, Sage looked at the door. They heard the muffled sound of Chloe in the hallway, humming a tune on her guitar. They thought of the name Sage—the healer, the survivor. They weren't Isabella anymore. They weren't Ellie's daughter. They were a person capable of creation.

Sage walked back to their room, the test tucked into the pocket of their denim vest. Chloe was sitting on the bed, re-stringing her guitar. She looked up, her amber eyes immediately catching the tremor in Sage's jaw.

"Sage? What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Sage sat beside her, the mattress dipping. They took Chloe's hand—the hand that had held theirs through nightmares and recovery milestones.

"Chloe... I don't know how to say this." Sage pulled the test out and laid it on the quilt, right next to Sophie's old sketch. "I'm pregnant."

Chloe's breath hitched. She stared at the stick, her eyes wide, her brain processing the biological reality of their night together months ago. As a trans woman, the weight of her own biology often brought her grief, but seeing this—the proof of what they had created together—brought a sudden, fierce rush of tears to her eyes.

"Is this... is this okay?" Chloe whispered, her voice cracking. "Are you okay? Your recovery, your body..."

Sage looked at the sketch of the person in the field—the person Sophie knew they could be. They realized that for years, they had used their body as a weapon against themselves. Now, it was a vessel.

"I'm terrified," Sage admitted, a single tear falling. "I'm terrified of the changes. But for the first time, I don't want to disappear. I want to be here for this. I want us to be the parents we never had."

Chloe pulled Sage into her arms, burying her face in their neck. "We'll do it together. No hospitals, no 'Isabella,' no erasure. Just us."

The road ahead was daunting. Sage knew the doctors at Trevor House would have to monitor their nutrition even more closely now. They knew the dysmorphia would fight them as their stomach began to round. But as they sat in Chloe's embrace, Sage felt a new kind of strength—a biological, primal defiance.

They weren't just surviving for themselves anymore. They were surviving for the new life that was, for the first time, making Sage feel truly, undeniably whole. As Alex led Chloe toward the East Wing to get settled, Sage remained standing by the window. The grief for Sophie was still there—a quiet, permanent ache—but it had shifted. It was no longer a weight dragging them down; it was a foundation. Sophie had told them not to let the world erase them, and now, looking at Chloe, Sage realized that being "seen" wasn't just about labels. It was about the courage to be perceived by someone else.

Later that evening, during the house dinner—a meal where people actually laughed and talked about music instead of "intake protocols"—Chloe ended up sitting directly across from Sage.

"So, Sage," Chloe said, leaning forward as she picked at a salad. "Alex told me you're the resident expert on the garden here. I've got a succulent that's looking a little tragic. Do you think you could help me save it?"

Sage looked at Chloe, at the way the light caught the amber in her eyes, and at the guitar-calloused tips of her fingers. They felt a hunger that had nothing to do with a meal plan. It was a hunger for the future.

"Yeah," Sage said, a real, unforced smile breaking across their face. "I think we can definitely save it." The first ultrasound was a hurdle of sensory triggers. The cold gel on Sage's stomach felt like the clinical lubricants of the hospital, and the darkened room hummed with the same sterile electricity as the ICU. Sage's hand was a vice around Chloe's, their knuckles white.

The technician moved the transducer across Sage's abdomen. On the monitor, a grainy, grey world flickered into view.

"Okay, let's see what we have here," the technician said. She paused, tilting the screen. "Oh. Well, that explains why your hormone levels were so high."

Sage's heart skipped. "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all," the technician smiled, pointing to two distinct, pulsing flickers on the screen. "There's heartbeat number one... and right there, that's heartbeat number two. Sage, Chloe—you're having twins."

Sage felt the air leave their lungs. They looked at Chloe, whose eyes were wide with a mix of terror and absolute, radiant wonder. The "Voice" in Sage's head tried to whisper about the sheer scale of the body changes coming with two babies, but it was drowned out by the rhythmic, double-time thumping of the monitors. Thump-thump, thump-thump. "Two," Chloe whispered, a tear escaping and tracing a line down her cheek. "We're going to need a bigger stroller." The months that followed were a testament to Sage's resilience. Carrying twins while in recovery was the hardest thing they had ever done.

Month 5: Sage's body began to change rapidly. The rounding of their stomach was a daily battle with gender dysphoria and the old eating disorder. There were mornings when Sage couldn't look in the mirror. Chloe would cover the glass with a soft blanket and sit on the floor with them, rubbing Sage's back and reminding them that their body was a sacred bridge, not a prison.

Month 7: Sage had to move to "high-calorie maintenance." Every meal was a conscious choice to defy the ghost of Isabella. They worked closely with a trans-affirming nutritionist at Trevor House, framing the food as "fuel for the team." Maya helped Sage decorate the nursery in the East Wing—painting the walls a soft, earthy sage green (to match Sage's name) and hanging Sophie's sketch in a gold frame above the cribs.

Month 8: Sage was on modified bed rest. Their ankles swelled, and their heart—once so sluggish—labored under the weight of three lives. Ellie tried to send "gifts"—pink and blue baby clothes addressed to "Isabella's children"—but Alex intercepted them at the door. Sage didn't even look at them.

By the ninth month, Sage felt like a force of nature. They no longer felt "light" or "hollow." They felt heavy, grounded, and incredibly powerful. They had reclaimed the word parent as something gender-neutral and beautiful.

One night, sitting in the garden at Trevor House, Sage felt a double kick—a sharp, synchronized movement beneath their ribs. They looked at the stars and realized that by refusing to be erased, they had created an entire future. They were no longer the person who pulled out a feeding tube in a fit of despair; they were the person who was about to bring two new lives into a world that finally had a place for them.

The birth was not the clinical, cold experience Sage had feared. Because of their history, the Trevor House staff and Dr. Aris had helped them coordinate with a "trauma-informed" birthing team at a hospital that specialized in LGBTQ+ care.

It began in the early hours of a rainy Tuesday. Sage didn't feel "pain" at first; they felt a sudden, rhythmic tightening that made the old "Voice" try to flicker back to life—Your body is out of control. But Sage breathed through it, leaning against Chloe, who held them steady.

"You're doing it, Sage," Chloe whispered, her voice a constant anchor in the storm. "You're bringing them home."

The labor lasted fourteen hours. In the birthing suite—softly lit and filled with a playlist of Chloe's acoustic guitar tracks—Sage transformed. They were no longer the frail person from the "Quiet Room." They were a warrior. Every contraction was a reclamation of the space they had once tried to vacate.

The room was a blur of focused energy. Sage sat upright, gripped by a primal, fierce strength.

"One more big push, Sage. You're almost there," the midwife encouraged.

At 4:12 PM, a sharp, piercing cry filled the room. The first twin—a baby with a surprising shock of dark hair—was placed briefly on Sage's chest. Sage gasped, the heat of the tiny body grounding them instantly.

But there was no time to rest. Five minutes later, the second cry joined the first—a slightly smaller, more delicate sound.

"Two healthy babies," the midwife announced, her voice thick with emotion.

Sage lay back, exhausted and sweating, their chest heaving. One baby was tucked into Chloe's arms, and one was nestled against Sage's heartbeat. The twins—a boy and a girl—looked up at them with dark, curious eyes.

"What are we naming them?" Chloe asked, her face wet with tears as she looked from the babies to Sage.

Sage looked at the gold-framed sketch of themselves that they had brought from Trevor House, propped up on the bedside table. They thought of the girl who had saved their life in the library.

"The girl is Sophie," Sage said, their voice raspy but certain. "And the boy... he's Leo." (Named after the therapist who had first asked Sage what the Voice was saying).

As the nurses checked Sage's vitals, a strange thing happened. For the first time in years, Sage looked down at their body—the soft, stretched skin of their stomach, the marks of the struggle it had endured—and didn't feel disgust.

They didn't see "fat" or "failure." They saw a map of survival. They saw the body that had survived a heart rate of 42, a feeding tube, and a year of erasure, only to produce two perfect, screaming lives.

"You did it, Sage," Chloe whispered, kissing their forehead.

"No," Sage corrected, looking at their family—the trans mother, the non-binary parent, and the two tiny lives that would never know what it felt like to be unwanted. "We did it."

Outside the hospital window, the rain had stopped, leaving the world smelling of wet earth and new beginnings. Sage was no longer "light as air." They were heavy with love, and for the first time, the weight felt exactly right. The arrival back at Trevor House was nothing like Sage's first entrance. There were no sirens, no transport vans, and no fear. Instead, the front porch was lined with people. Maya held a handmade "Welcome Home" banner, and Alex was already waiting to help Chloe unload the double car seat from the SUV. As Sage stepped out of the car, carrying Sophie wrapped in a sage-green blanket, a wave of emotion hit them. This house had seen their lowest point—the grief, the relapse, the terror of the ICU. Now, it was seeing their victory.

"The East Wing is officially a nursery!" Maya cheered, though she kept her voice low as she peered into the car seat at little Leo. "I can't believe they're actually here. They look like you, Sage. They have your eyes."

"And Chloe's chin," Sage laughed, their voice warm.

The first few months were a whirlwind of sleepless nights and communal support. The residents of Trevor House took turns on "diaper duty" or rocking a fussy baby so Sage could attend their recovery groups. In this chosen family, the twins weren't just Sage and Chloe's children; they were a symbol of hope for everyone in the house—living proof that recovery wasn't just about "not dying," but about building a life worth living.

Epilogue

The morning sun hit the hardwood floors of a small, charming bungalow on the edge of the city. It wasn't a Victorian estate or a padded cell. It was a house with a small yard, a swing set, and a front door painted a bright, defiant yellow.

Sage stood in the kitchen, packing two small lunchboxes for the twins' first day of playgroup. They moved with a grace and strength that had seemed impossible three years ago. Their body was no longer an enemy to be starved; it was the engine that powered their life.

"Sage? Have you seen Leo's other shoe?" Chloe called from the hallway.

Sage looked up. Chloe's transition had progressed beautifully; she looked radiant, her hair long and lustrous, a woman who had finally found peace with her own reflection. She was holding a struggling, giggling two-year-old Leo, who was currently trying to eat a crayon.

"It's under the sofa, next to the guitar case," Sage called back, smiling.

They walked to the living room, where little Sophie was sitting on the rug, "reading" a picture book to their dog. On the mantle sat two framed photos. One was the sketch of Sage that Sophie had drawn in the hospital—a reminder of the person who saw Sage before they saw themselves.

The other was a legal document: The Final Adoption and Name Change Decree. Sage was legally Sage. The children were legally theirs. And Ellie's name was nowhere to be found.

The doorbell rang. It was Maya and Alex, coming over to help celebrate the "Housewarming-Birth-Day."

Sage stepped onto the porch of their very own home. They took a deep breath of the fresh, open air. There were no fences here. No cameras in the corners. No digital heartbeats ticking down on the wall.

"You ready?" Chloe asked, slipping her hand into Sage's.

Sage looked at their children, then at the life they had built from the ashes of "Isabella." They felt the solid, beautiful weight of their own existence.

"I've been ready for a long time," Sage said.

As they walked down the steps to meet their friends, Sage realized that the "hollow" wall hadn't just crumbled—it had been cleared away to make room for a garden. And in that garden, everything was finally in bloom.

The bungalow that had once felt quiet and new was now a vibrant, chaotic ecosystem of lived-in joy. Eleven years had turned the toddlers into eleven-year-old pre-teens, and the silence Sage once sought had been replaced by a soundtrack of slamming doors, overlapping voices, and the constant strumming of Chloe's guitar.

"Leo! If I find your soccer cleats in the fruit bowl one more time, they're going in the compost!" Sage shouted over the sizzle of the griddle.

Sage stood in the kitchen, their hair now cut into a sharp, silver-toned fade. They were wearing a shirt that said Support Your Local Gender Outlaw. At thirty-two, Sage looked healthy—not just medically stable, but physically robust. Their arms, once thin as reeds, were toned from years of gardening and chasing kids.

Leo skidded into the kitchen, his hair a wild nest of dark curls just like Chloe's. "They weren't in the fruit bowl, Sage! They were next to it. Total difference."

"Logic doesn't save the bananas from smelling like turf, kiddo," Chloe said, walking in and kissing Sage on the cheek. She looked elegant even in her paint-stained overalls, her transition a settled, beautiful reality. She reached for a cup of coffee.

"Where's Sophie?"

"In the 'Black Hole,'" Sage sighed, gesturing toward the back bedroom.

Sophie emerged a moment later, looking like a hauntingly beautiful fusion of her namesake and the parents who raised her. She was wearing a thrifted oversized sweater and thick combat boots. She had Sage's intense, observant eyes and a sketchbook tucked under her arm.

"I'm not hungry," Sophie muttered, her eyes fixed on her phone.

The air in the kitchen went still for a split second. It was a trigger phrase—a ghost from a decade ago. Chloe and Sage locked eyes. In the past, that sentence would have caused a panic attack. Now, it was met with a practiced, gentle firmness.

"Soph," Sage said, leaning against the counter. "We don't do the 'not hungry' dance in this house. Your brain needs fuel for that art project. Sit. Three bites of protein, or we don't go to the museum today."

Sophie rolled her eyes, but she sat. She knew the history—she had seen the photos and heard the stories of the "Quiet Room" and the miracles that brought her here. She took a bite of the eggs Sage had made. "Fine. But I'm choosing the music in the car."

The house was a beautiful mess. There were muddy footprints near the door, a pile of laundry on the sofa that Sage had

been "meaning to fold" for three days, and a shelf dedicated entirely to the kids' trophies and Chloe's concert posters. It wasn't the perfect, sterile life Ellie had once envisioned for "Isabella." It was louder, weirder, and infinitely more honest. "Hey," Chloe whispered, catching Sage's hand as the twins started arguing over whose turn it was to feed the dog. "You okay? You went quiet for a second."

Sage looked at their family—the trans mother who had saved them, the son who was a whirlwind of energy, and the daughter who carried the name of a girl who didn't make it. Sage felt the weight of their own body, solid and present, anchored to the floor by the sheer gravity of being loved.

"I'm more than okay," Sage said, squeezing Chloe's hand. "I was just thinking about how much I love the noise."

As they piled into the car, Sage caught a glimpse of themselves in the rearview mirror. They didn't see a patient. They didn't see a "Code Gray." They saw a parent. A partner. A person who had refused to be erased.

Sage backed the car out of the driveway, the radio blasting a pop song the kids loved. They drove past the edge of the city, toward a future that was messy, complicated, and entirely theirs. The "hollow" was gone; Sage was full.

The drive to the museum was a chaotic symphony of Leo's animated retelling of a Minecraft glitch and Sophie's selective "teenager" silence as she sketched out the window. Sage sat in the driver's seat, a secret warmth spreading through them that had nothing to do with the heater.

They pulled into the parking lot of the Contemporary Art Institute. As the twins scrambled out of the car, eager to see the new exhibit on "Identity and Space," Sage caught Chloe's eye over the roof of the SUV.

"You're glowing," Chloe whispered, leaning over to brush a stray silver hair from Sage's forehead. "Or you're about to tell me you bought more flower seeds we don't have room for."

Sage laughed, a rich, grounded sound. "Better. Well, busier, anyway."

They waited until they were inside the gallery, surrounded by massive, vibrant canvases and the echoing footsteps of other families. They found a quiet corner in the "Botanical Abstract" wing—a room filled with paintings of roots and blooming wildflowers.

"Hey, Soph, Leo," Sage called out softly.

The twins turned. Sophie looked up from her sketchbook, her brow furrowed in curiosity. Leo stopped mid-air, having been about to try and touch a textured painting.

"I have something to tell you all," Sage said. They took Chloe's hand, lacing their fingers together. "You know how we always talk about how Trevor House was a place for growth? And how this family is always growing?"

Leo's eyes went wide. "Did we get another dog? Please tell me it's a big one."

Sage smiled, then reached out and placed Leo's hand—and then Sophie's—right against their stomach. Sage's body, once a place of such pain, felt firm and vibrant under their touch.

"No dog," Sage whispered. "But in about six months, you're both going to have to share the backseat with one more."

The silence lasted for exactly three seconds.

"Wait, for real?" Sophie breathed, her "cool" exterior evaporating instantly as a massive grin broke across her face. She dropped her sketchbook and hugged Sage's waist. "Another one? Are you okay, Sage? Is your heart okay?"

"I'm more than okay, Soph," Sage said, tears of joy stinging their eyes. "The doctors checked everything. I'm stronger than I've ever been."

Leo let out a literal victory yell that echoed through the gallery, drawing a "shushing" look from a security guard that the family completely ignored. "I'm going to teach them how to play soccer! And how to hide their shoes from you!"

Chloe pulled the three of them into a massive, tangled embrace right there in the middle of the exhibit.

As Sage stood in the center of the hug, they looked past Chloe's shoulder at a painting on the wall. It was a simple piece: a gold-leafed crack in a stone wall with a single green sprout pushing through.

It reminded Sage of the "hollow" wall from Clearview—the one that had crumbled and become a prison. But looking at their wife, their pre-teens, and the new life growing inside them, Sage realized the wall hadn't just been a barrier. It had been the old shell.

They weren't "light" anymore. They were heavy with history, heavy with children, and heavy with a future they had once been certain they wouldn't live to see.

"Okay, okay," Sage laughed, wiping their eyes as they pulled back from the hug. "Let's go see the art before Leo gets us kicked out."

"I am the art!" Leo shouted, sprinting toward the next room.

Sage and Chloe walked behind them, hand in hand, moving through the light of the gallery. They were a mess of identities, a blur of recovery, and a triumph of love. They were exactly where they were supposed to be.

Resources

Signs and Symptoms of Eating Disorders

Warning Signs and Symptoms, NEDA: [External link:open_in_new](#) video and comprehensive list of emotional, behavioral and physical symptoms of 10 different types of eating disorders.

The SCOFF Questionnaire, British Medical Journal (BMJ): [External link:open_in_new](#) explanation of and instructions for using the SCOFF screening tool to identify a potential eating disorder.

Eating Attitudes Test, Psychology Tools: [External link:open_in_new](#) self-administered screening test of 26 questions that can help identify a need for professional attention. This tool does not take the place of a professional diagnosis or consultation.

7 Signs You Might Have an Eating Disorder, Crisis Text Line: [External link:open_in_new](#) description of different eating disorders and signs that a person might need professional help.

Relapse Warning Signs, Mirror Mirror: [External link:open_in_new](#) list of 19 different signs that a person in recovery might be relapsing or about to relapse.

Understanding Different Types of Eating Disorders

Eating Disorders, Medline Plus: [External link:open_in_new](#) summary of three major types of eating disorders with relevant research and resources for support.

Information by Eating Disorder, NEDA: [External link:open_in_new](#) central page for 11 different types of eating disorders; readers can click through for more information about individual disorders.

Common Types of Eating Disorders Observed in the Elderly Population, Eating Disorder Hope: [External link:open_in_new](#) information about the physical and behavioral effects of eating disorders specific to older adults.

How to Tell Someone You Have an Eating Disorder, Beat Eating Disorders: [External link:open_in_new](#) recommendations and support for deciding how and who to talk to about an eating disorder, including examples of conversation starters and considerations for finding a safe space.

Eating Disorders in Men and Boys, NEDA: [External link:open_in_new](#) information about eating disorders and recovery unique to people who identify as men, including body image concerns, masculinity and statistics about underrepresentation.

Treatment and Recovery Options

Stages of Recovery, NEDA descriptions of six possible stages of recovery; includes frequently asked questions and answers.

Questions to Ask Treatment Providers, NEDA: list of questions for patients, family members and other members of a support system to ask providers about treatment and recovery.

Find Treatment, Recovery Warriors portal for users to search for local and recommended treatment providers.

Eating Disorder Treatment: Know Your Options, MayoClinic: [External link:open_in_new](#) explanation of what types of treatment are available for eating disorder recovery, including what different providers can offer and a variety of goals they can help patients work toward.

Help and Treatment, Beat Eating Disorders: [External link:open_in_new](#) explanation of what to expect at an appointment with a health care provider and where to find treatment for specific types of eating disorders.

Free and Low-Cost Resources

The Recovery Warrior Show, Recovery Warriors: [External link:open_in_new](#) podcast about support and inspiration for people who are recovering from an eating disorder.

Recovery Record: [External link:open_in_new](#) mobile app people in recovery can use to find support resources including coping mechanisms, structured meal plans and a secure chat line for help.

Rise Up + Recover, Recovery Warriors:External link:open_in_new mobile app with tools for managing eating disorders.

Chats from the Living Room, Morningside (PDF, 318 KB):External link:open_in_new free weekly video conference for people in recovery to find support from health care professionals.

Chat Rooms, Beat Eating Disorders:External link:open_in_new list of chat rooms for people in the U.K. to connect with each other and find support.

The Eating Disorder Recovery Podcast:External link:open_in_new podcast where hosts discuss the psychology of eating disorders, body image and recovery processes for a variety of eating disorder diagnoses.

ED Matters Podcast:External link:open_in_new weekly podcast that covers timely topics for people in different age groups and sexual minorities, including recovery while social distancing.

Dietitians Unplugged Podcast:External link:open_in_new monthly podcast series that features registered dietitians as guests and discusses healthy, body image and intuitive eating practices.

Where to Find a Dietitian

Find a Dietitian in Your State, Dietitian Central:External link:open_in_new database of registered dietitians and nutrition specialists in each state.

Counselor Directory, The Original Intuitive Eating Pros:External link:open_in_new international list of licensed nutritionists, dietitians and other providers.

The Registry, Health at Every Size:External link:open_in_new portal for users to search for different types of care providers or specialists, including nutritionists and dietitians.

Finding a Mental Health Counselor or Therapist

Finding an Eating Disorder Therapist, Mirror Mirror:External link:open_in_new guide to choosing a therapist that works for you, including questions to ask a counselor when evaluating whether they're a good fit.

Request a Recovery Mentor, National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD):External link:open_in_new: program for people in recovery to find a mentor who can support them by phone, email or text.

Eating Disorder Therapists, Nutritionists and Specialists Directory, Eating Disorder Hope:External link:open_in_new international directory of licensed counselors, therapists and other care providers.

Finding/Evaluating an Eating Disorder Therapist, ED Referral:External link:open_in_new guide to finding a counselor including what to expect from a professional counselor, signs of unprofessional behavior, and where to find a therapist nearby.

Treatment Providers, NEDA:External link:open_in_new interactive map of treatment centers and other recovery services across the United States.

Support Groups for Eating Disorders

NEDA Network of Virtual Support Groups, NEDA:External link:open_in_new list of virtual support groups for different time zones offered by multiple organizations dedicated to eating disorder recovery across the United States.

Eating Disorder Foundation Support Groups, Eating Disorder Foundation:External link:open_in_new list of recurring virtual support groups for people recovering from eating disorders, as well as family members and friends who are supporting someone through recovery.

The Alliance Support Groups, The Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness:External link:open_in_new list of virtual support groups and answers to frequently asked questions about what to expect from attending.

Around the Dinner Table Forum, FEAST:External link:open_in_new online community of parents of eating disorder patients around the world.

The Sanctuary, Beat Eating Disorders:External link:open_in_new information about an online chat room for U.K. residents recovering from an eating disorder.

Coffee and Conversations for Moms, Rock Recovery:External link:open_in_new monthly virtual support group for mothers who are recovering from an eating disorder.

Free Eating Disorder and Mental Health Support Groups, Center for Discovery Eating Disorder Treatment:External link:open_in_new free platform for peer-based support groups for anyone who has been affected by an eating disorder or seeking mental health support.

Helping Someone with an Eating Disorder

Talking to Someone With an Eating Disorder, Mirror Mirror:External link:open_in_new recommendations for approaching someone about an eating disorder, including examples of affirming and supportive language.

Family Involvement: The Role of Family in Eating Disorders, Eating Disorder Hope:External link:open_in_new information about the role of different members in a support system including parents, siblings and romantic partners.

Helping Someone With an Eating Disorder, HelpGuide: External link:open_in_new tips for approaching and addressing a person who might have an eating disorder, including recommendations on what to do and what not to do during a sensitive conversation.

How to Help a Loved One, ANAD:External link:open_in_new list of do's and don'ts for supporting a loved one during their recovery.

10 Helpful Things to Say to Someone With an Eating Disorder, Beat Eating Disorders:External link:open_in_new examples of affirming language to use when supporting a person in recovery.

Hotlines for Immediate Help

NEDA Helpline:External link:open_in_new phone and chat line available during business hours from Monday through Friday, for seeking support or resources for you or a loved one. Call 800-931-2237.

ANAD Helpline:External link:open_in_new phone line with professionals available from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. CT from Monday-Friday to offer support, information about eating disorders and treatment options. Call 630-577-1330

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) HelpLine:External link:open_in_new connect by phone or email to a HelpLine volunteer who can answer questions, offer support and provide practical next steps. Call 1-800-950-6264

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:External link:open_in_new If you or someone you know is in crisis—whether they are considering suicide or not—call the toll-free Lifeline at 800-273- 8255 to speak with a trained crisis counselor 24/7.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline:External link:open_in_new free, confidential, 24/7, 365-days-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders. Call 1-800-662-4357.

7 Cups of Tea:External link:open_in_new anonymous, free platform to speak with volunteer listeners available 24/7 to give emotional support over online chat.

Crisis Text Line:[External link:open_in_new](#) 24/7 text line for anyone to anonymously speak to a trained professional about mental health concerns. Text HOME to 741741.